Monster Girl Saga Vol3

Monster Girl Saga - III

Anonemoose

Chapter 33

Crooking my finger underneath my collar and pulling nervously, I walked closer into the metaphorical lion's den, the one obstacle between us and escape over the Marru river... But I began to think maybe Rose's plan was the easier one. The pressure must have been getting to me because assaulting the gatehouse on the river garrison was definitely suicidal. Instead of arrows, slings and steel, I had agreed to be subjected to feel ridiculous. With a clean shave, a fine haircut kept underneath a three point hat, a foppish trench coat with needless frills, hose socks and silly buckle boots, I felt as absurd as I looked. I had always sneered and mocked those Renaissance fair-goers, now I was living it myself. What's worse is that I fit in perfectly with everyone else around me.

“Cease your fidgeting. It is poor manners.” A voice walking beside me chastised.

“Easier said than done.” I snapped back, tugging at my collar again.

“Concentrate on locating the Duke. We need not be here any longer than that.” She reassured me calmly.

“Also easier said than done. We don't even know what he looks like.”

“Then we ask... And mingle.”

“Don't let me stop you then.”

“Well- I... I would think that it is you who-”

“No no, I'm not the gregarious gentleman you're trying to make me be right now. I can already feel myself getting drained by the second.”

I surveyed our surroundings as we stood upon the garden path. It was night, but so many torches and candles were lit that you would hardly notice the sun's absence. The clip clopping of horse shoes on meticulously level stone and the sound of wood wheels echoed from behind us. Horse drawn carriages unloaded fashion disasters one after another before trotting off again to make room for the next. We stood in a long lineup, in front and behind us, a constant din as other foppish dressed men and women cheerfully exchanged greeting, reuniting and introducing themselves alike. We were all heading in the same

direction toward a large estate, a miniature Versailles.

It was Property of Duke Billum who ruled over Beitterheim, a small but rich province in south-east Vilmheim. This gathering spoke volume about that wealth. It seemed like nobles from all over were gathering here. No one could deny the call of the rich and powerful, especially not the slightly less rich and powerful. The most extravagant welcome laid out for them, and all of it not even so rare an occasion, luckily for us.

My eyes wandered until they almost met with another man, and I instinctively looked down and away. I wasn't ready yet to deal with that. Even if I was ready I certainly didn't want to anyways. This didn't go unnoticed by the girl beside me who lightly stabbed her elbow into my side. I bit down on my reflex to shout out, 'What the hell?' but I did still look over, annoyed.

Staring back at me, with red eyes, was a woman wrapped in a long flowing pure white ballroom dress with a gold pattern. She was decorated with an absurdly wide skirt supported by a wire mesh underneath, a low cropped chest with shoulders bare, frills everywhere, long sleeve gloves and petite little heels. Her long black hair cascaded down her back: the top of her head hidden beneath a horned headdress. The gloves and shoes though, I kept staring at them; she noticed and tried to hide from me.

I leaned over and whispered, “You sure that disguise is going to do it?”

She leaned over, met me halfway and whispered back, “I have not a single doubt. The enchantment will hold until midnight.”

Midnight, huh? Definitely cliché. I stared at the headdress sitting upon her head next, which she too tried to cover with her hands.

“That's not what I meant. I mean your ears under the hat. They're still there right?”

“Shh,” she hushed me. “Do not risk drawing attention to it.”

It was hard not to. If anyone looked close enough, they'd notice this girl didn't have ears. No human ears were sticking out from the sides of her head. You might say they were just hidden behind her long flowing black hair, but the real ones were hidden beneath her crown. Her only feature she wasn't able to hide away and replace with more convincing ones.

“Don't get me started on the tail either. Luckily for us the fashion just so happens to be to our advantage, but are you really sure this is going to work?”

“Please my liege, do not tempt fate to cause a scene. You know that Rose is watching.”

“Yeah, I know...”

Rose had only agreed to this on one condition. If it all goes south, she gets to cut loose and do things her way. One panic, one flash of a guard's steel, that's all it would take, and she'd come crashing in. The repercussions of her armed intrusion on this little slice of high society would be lasting and troublesome to say the least.

How Susan got Rose to accept this plan, I haven't the foggiest clue. I still don't know what she was up to... She didn't just want to wear the dress and play the part she seems so eager to have me take, does she? She looked just as nervous as I did, so maybe not. Maybe she thought this little caper was the best choice we had?

I had to think back on it and try to come to terms with what was ahead before we passed into the villa.

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“So we walk up to the gate, I fire up, cut down the door, kick the lock on the winch, and we run across!” Rose shouted enthusiastically, flourishing her sword. “There'd be only a hundred of em, not even half of them'd be awake if we sneak up at-”

“Absolutely not.” Susan said, raising her voice.

Rose didn't take to kindly and pressed herself on Susan like a thug, “Huh? You saying you got a better idea?”

“Any idea is favorable to a frontal assault on a fortress. I will not allow your glory hounding and battlelust to put the Pharaoh at risk like that.”

“All I hear is a coward trying to tell me they don't think I got what it takes.”

Not even a week after escaping Springbrook, and a scant few hours ago, these two were back at each other’s throats. This time it was because of the wall we had come across and how to deal with it. Well, not so much a wall as a body of water. Below the hill where I sat

and listened to the two of them argue was the city of Beitterheim which was only a little smaller than Vilmheim. It hugged the ferocious river, and although its walls were not as ludicrous as Vilmheim's, and the fields around it weren't as rich or verdant, it gave off an unassailable aura.

Situated on the extreme south and east corner of the country, it held a choke point on the Marru river. I originally thought that it was just like any old river, but the width of this river was at least ten kilometers wide and several meters deep for days both upstream and downstream. Being fed by tributaries from the Wyrmbacks mountains on the other side, the current from the spring runoff made the waters fierce. I recall seeing those mountains jutting above the horizon, even from so far away; their snowcapped peaks and glaciers just a taste of the amount of water that would melt every spring.

If we rode the river down, we'd pass through Church influenced counties, duchies, kingdoms and the like for days. The currents were so strong, I wasn't sure how we would stop either. If we stopped anywhere, if anyone saw us and spread the tale, we'd be surrounded. There was only one option, cross the Marru river.

Even that option wasn't so easy. There was no way the three of us could man a ship big enough to fight against that current... Unless Susan were to create a few dozen mummies to work the oars and—NO! That was far too morbid and cruel to contemplate. Besides, it was too late now. The only way across was the Marru Bridge, the ancient stone structure that spans the river at Beitterheim. Apparently, the beast of a bridge has stood for well over a thousand years. I don't know how a primitive medieval society, particularly one that came before this one, could build a super structure like a ten kilometer bridge, but they did, and since it is the only bridge for hundreds of kilometers north or south, it was valuable.

Any trader or traveler wanting to cross the river would have to do it here or spend weeks on a detour. And anyone wanting to get over that river would need a permit. Beitterheim and the whole kingdom is very rich for this one reason. Selling passage through what seems to divide the whole north in two. Maybe all that wealth is why they can weather the Church and their crusades time after time. Not that Beitterheim seems like it has ever been attacked. With the river and the fortifications surrounding it, it would be fruitless. Which is why when Rose suggested we just try to storm the keep guarding the entrance to the bridge, I could only agree with Susan.

I sighed and tried to put this argument to rest, maybe finally for once, “Rose, there's no way the three of us can break in like that.”

She spun around on the spot and shouted out without missing a beat, “Well, they're not gonna think one lone fighter is a threat, or they'd have built a tighter defense.”

Where had I heard an argument like that before- never mind...

“That's not the point Rose. Not only would we have to break in, defeat all the guards, we'd also have to not let on who we are.”

“Precisely,” Susan said as she physically slipped back into the conversation. “Our presence here is most certainly only on the behest of a few who would rather not expend resources on our capture or execution and perhaps I may be bolder yet to say are supporting us covertly. If were to undertake such a brazen act, surely we would lose whatever beneficiaries we have left in this kingdom.”

Rose's eyes glazed over about half way through Susan speaking, not that the anubis noticed.

“The skinny of it, Rose, is attacking that bridge is biting off more than we can chew. I know how much you love trouble, but we just can't risk it.”

Rose sprung back, “I don't see her coming up with any better idea!”

“Because not once for the past week have you been silent long enough to give me a chance to meditate on it.”

“You looking for another fight? Maybe you want to settle right here?”

It was about then that I had a bad flashback. That night in the demon realm. I was certain I had done things and had things done to me in the span of one night that many others don't experience in their whole lives. The memories were spotty, scattered, but I certainly recall more of it than the two of them. Why? I don't know, but even if it... well... felt good, real good, that didn't change the fact that the icing on the cake was momentary madness, loss of bodily control and ultimately memory loss. None of those things were a fair trade for what I got out of that.

“Hmph.” Susan snorted, crossing her arms in front of her

chest. “For your information, I have conjured up a plan. If you'd just listen.”

“Wha? When did you come up with that? Why not say something?”

“I DID say something. You persist and are incessant in your interrupting me at every turn and confound my every effort to seriously discuss it.”

Rose didn't say a thing. She merely crossed her arms as well and sat herself back on a stump. I think she was being quiet now just to spite Susan who claimed she did nothing but make a fuss and a commotion wherever she went. Susan had pulled the subtle reverse psychology card again. The fact she didn't use it more often told me volumes about her patience and foresight. She'd rather suffer a few days of annoyance than give up her only weapon against Rose.

Susan slapped a cocky grin on her face, “We shall get a mark of passage from this one Duke Billum.”

There was a moment of silence after that. Susan remained motionless with that smirk on her face while Rose and I stared at her with blank expressions. I think she was expecting more of a reaction than that.

Her face turned red and tried to return to its usual stoic gaze, “Of course, it's the most simple out of all options but not so farfetched.”

“Uhh...” Rose groaned, “You do know rumors about Billum? That he's a bit of a looney?”

“A what?”

“Looney. Crazy. Touched in the head. Even I've heard about that.”

Thinking back, Rose was actually subtly and perhaps unintentionally confessing to her tendency to space out, forget things and get settled into her one track mind.

“Then you must also know that the Duke hosts lavish social gathering often. One of which I overheard will be happening tonight.”

I was caught in a double take for a second back then, 'Just how did she know that?' I thought.

“How, when and where did you hear that?” I asked.

Susan merely pointed to the jackal ears sitting atop her head, “My ears, of which I am proud, are not merely ornamental. I heard mention of it several times on our journey here since we departed Springbrook.”

“Okay. Great.” Rose said sarcastically, rocking back and forth on her tree stump. “And that matters because?”

“We will disguise ourselves and sneak into the party. Locate Billum and secure the proper authorization and papers.”

Even then I sounded a little skeptical myself, “And why would he agree to that?” I asked.

“Negotiation.” Susan said plainly. “If that is not sufficient. Forceful negotiations.”

It was about then that Rose perked up and started to pay attention.

“You plan on shaking down the Duke? And you were telling me about not causing trouble?”

“Merely a last resort. I am certain we shall reach an agreement before that. If not, then we merely require the artifacts necessary to forge such a document ourselves. We require it only to fool the guard once and be gone to the other side of the river and depart Vilmheim before anyone is the wiser.”

"Hold up.” I interjected. “This must be a high class party. Nobles, high society, the whole nine yards. The three of us aren't just going to-”

“Not all three.” Susan corrected me.

Now Rose had perked up, but in a completely different way than before, in a very irritated way.

“What?” Rose growled.

“Such a delicate mission of deceit and subterfuge I feel is ill suited to one such as you, Rose. I will accompany the Pharaoh, and together we will gain entrance to the party. You will offer support, stay hidden and act on opportunity from the shadows.”

"The two of us?" I had to ask, puzzled again. “I just said this is nobility here. Human nobility. This might be Vilmheim, but I doubt they'll just let monsters run amok.”

“They will bear witness to no such thing.” Susan said, very sure of herself. “Although certain facilities of my magic are null, I still retain a limited ability to alter my form. Since long before my service and slumber within my tomb, the anubi were spirits by nature, our forms elusive, from the jackal headed men and women to the wolves of the desert. It will take all my magics, but I will cast an enchantment, an illusion, that will let us pass as highborn... For a short time.”

“A short time?”

“Until midnight. When the day does change, when the Sun God is furthest from the land of the living, my power will, for the briefest moment, be at its weakest. I have thought and calculated that it will be that instant that I will be unable to hold the spell for a moment longer.”

“Why only mention this now, Susan?”

Susan fidgeted for a bit, “Well, for you see. It is an embarrassing form... That I am not used to.” She muttered, embarrassed for some reason and nearly whispering.

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I wasn't totally sure I had heard everything she had said then, but apparently this form she has taken was difficult to maintain. It had something to do with demonic energy, the stuff that was spread over the entire world. It wasn't just in the pockets within Demon Realms. In those places, it was thick enough to affect humans and every drop of it came from the Demon Lord herself. It ruled over the monsters, dictated their forms, and from what I've been told, influenced their hearts and minds as well. If the Demon Lord was a powerful succubus, the like of which has never been seen, then all the lewd transformations of monsters centuries ago and their behavior then and now makes sense.

Some more than others seem to be affected by the pervasive force of demonic energy, and it didn't always affect them in the same way. For Susan, she lost her ability to use her magics for shape-shifting. The Susan standing beside me now barely managed to assume a human form. Her paws had been replaced with dainty human hands and feet; however, even with all her power she was unable to transform her tail and ears. She easily altered the

appearance of our clothes so that they looked like noble attire, but her anubis features were clearly a different thing altogether. We only had to midnight too. That was only four hours away, and then her magic would be at its weakest, and her illusion would break.

"There is no need to be so nervous, my liege. I will be beside you at all times... If I cannot, Rose will be watching from somewhere." Susan reassured me.

I think she sensed my apprehension. I felt very uncomfortable. Clenching my hands into fists and unclenching them nervously and looking around, I checked my corners for some threat that felt like it was looming and watching me from the shadows. Susan wrapped her arm and small gloved fingers around my arm and pressed herself closely to me, but it didn't help. Even that it felt really weird... For some reason.

"Pharaoh?" She quietly whispered, concerned. "I said I am here by your side."

"Yeah. I know. I can hear you... and feel you..."

"Then why shudder so? Surely you are not-"

"No no no. Not that. It's just-" I looked down at the hand wrapped around my arm. "Well, I'm not so comfortable with this whole situation either, you know..."

In the split second, my eyes betrayed me to steal a glance at Susan; my sight followed to her fingers, and after a second she blushed.

"I understand, Laven. I am uncomfortable as well. As I am unfamiliar with... Tonight will be but a short while, please bear it with me."

That's not what I was- no- I mean...I don't... really.... dammit....

Before I had time to understand my own feelings and contemplate it the line moved ahead again. I noticed I was suddenly standing before the butler at the gate. Wait, hold on! Since when did we get so close? I was only spaced out for a little- oh damn. I'm still not ready.

The butler looked up at us, over his tiny thin reading glasses hovering above the tip of his nose. My back straightened on reflex to imitate the immaculate posture of bred nobility, and I'm sure I felt the

same twitch from Susan hanging off my arm. A fake smile and I await the dreaded question.

“I apologize, good sir and madam, but I do not recognize your crest. Are you not on the VIP list?” The butler asked, unfurling and reading the scroll in his hand.

“We herald from the county of Burnsworth, laying within the northern stretches.” Susan replied.

“Burnsworth?” The butler said, the inflection in his voice betraying his confusion with a hint of suspicion.

Oh great. Not even twenty minutes in and we're already in trouble. The butler returned to scan his scroll for our names, and I'm sure he was preparing a series of other questions and events that was about to compromise the whole mission. I had to swallow everything, my nervousness, my pride and muster all my mental fortitude to perform a masterful bluff.

“Count Neval, from the Burnsworth wastes. Geoffrey Neval. This is my wife, Cynthia Neval. Surely you heard of the siege Vilmheim suffered not but a year ago? It is on the ramparts that I distinguished myself. Not so much as my brave brother and peers by my side, but enough so to impress the royal house to offer me peerage and land and title in the north. Not a place of fertile fields or lush forests, but be assured in the reclaimed lands, the hills hide riches beneath. It is within those realms I am expected to strike the earth add to the riches of the realm. I heard of the good Duke's gathering here, and although I may not be on the VIP list, I thought I may chance introduce myself to his grace.”

About halfway I wasn't sure if my poker face had crumbled; it was a likely outcome. My heart was racing, and although it was a cool spring night, I might start to ooze sweat at any moment as my entire body feels like it is actually perspiring. I gave a tentative look over to Susan who looked back at me; her face was calm with a calculated fake smile on it. She didn't flinch at my expression, so I guess my own was holding, but there was a worry in her eyes. Although changed, her eyes still shined a brilliant red near her irises. Definitely not normal. An oversight that I had ignored and glossed over. Never a good sign this late into the act.

While the two of us stewed in worry, the Butler appraised us and after a few seconds reached for an inked quill on a table beside

him and scratched a few notes onto the scroll.

“Very well, Mr. And Mrs. Neval. My master would be pleased to make your acquaintance, or at the very least have you accept his hospitality. The duke may yet grace his guests tonight with his presence. If not, the Duchess may lend you her ear for his sake.”

An armed guard unlocked the gate from the other side and motioned for the two of us to follow. With a bow from me and a curtsy from Susan we gracefully, with all the dignity we could muster, strolled forward into the spacious garden where dozens of the Duke's guests had gathered. Behind us the gate closed shut as the next guests were being cleared to enter. With fake smiles plastered onto our faces we walked until we were out of earshot from the gate before we both exhaled together.

“As expected from you, my Pharaoh. Your genius with diplomacy stuns even me.”

As I was catching my breath, I looked over my shoulder and spotted along the stone wall surrounding the villa, a flicker a fire and red that pulled itself onto the wall. Noticing my gaze even from so far away, Rose gave me a salute, a grin and leaped from the wall into one of the large trees scattered around the garden. We had all infiltrated successfully. We managed step one. Now came the hard part. Mingling with the nobles, blending in, not drawing attention, finding the Duke and convincing him to part with his signature. We'd steal it if we had to; it was a risk to go sneaking around inside the villa itself, but it had to be done. We had about three hours to do it and get out before the enchantment broke.

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After signing the names of the two nobles he had not heard of before Sebastian, Duke Billum's head butler, mulled the decision over in his head. Certainly after every war nobles die out, whole families sometimes. With constant wars and families falling and rising to prestige through arms, egalitarianism is not a foreign concept in Vilmheim. It was a rather open society, even monsters who worked hard, proved themselves and didn't cause trouble were welcome. The pagan religion worshiping the old gods did not have dogma that stated that all monsters should be exterminated after all.

The dangerous northern regions, it would take a brave or foolish man to try to tame those lands. Long ago, the royals had stopped thrusting it as a 'reward' for low born distinguishing

themselves in Vilmheim's many wars. Mr. Neval seemed an upstanding man, good with words and manners, posture and gleam in his eyes. He didn't look like a fool and carried himself like a proper gentleman and noble. His wife too, even his aging heart was set a flutter. A beauty such as that, surely the man must have performed some Herculean feat to win the favor of such a woman. The type of woman who had poems and paints created just to celebrate her. Women today have so much to compete with. Monsters roam the countryside, each one supernaturally beautiful. Each face and body hand sculpted with the vixen's own claws. The cruel and licentious Demon Lord's will shaped beings of pure temptation and bestowed them with power that dragged humanity from times of peace, that had lasted for almost a thousand years, to the brink of disaster in a few short decades.

That danger could sweep across the world in an instant if left unchecked. Such beautiful women must be revered as a testament, an homage to mankind and the gods. Not the demons who had been made through falsehood, or so Sebastian thought.

Sebastian had seen no reason not to give the man and his wife a chance to exercise their rights granted by the royals. Who was he, of such low station, to argue with them? As the two of them walked past him and through the gate, something caught Sebastian's eye. It was just a glimpse, just out of the corner of his eye. Sticking out from the hem of Mrs. Neval's dress, a bushy black mess of fur. Like a dog's tail he thought for just a moment. He shook his head. He must be seeing things; after all, he had barely slept for days in preparation for today. Tonight must go perfectly. He would redouble his efforts as the next nobles in line walked forward to be received and written into the guest book.

Chapter 34

It didn't take long, but I officially regretted the decision to go along with Susan's plan. Stealing a glance at her every so often told me she might as well. Her stone face quivered and twitched, her hands kneaded one another and no doubt she was squirming on her feet. Every so often she threw a glance at me, each time looking as if she wanted to scream, 'Help me!'. Each time, she was met with a face that said the exact same thing to her, so we both looked away from one another. I suppose we each thought the other would handle this situation rather well. I thought that, given how eloquently she talked, she'd be a natural at fitting in here with these highborn people.

Apparently living in a tomb with voiceless and near mindless husks for thousands of years throws a couple wrenches into the gears controlling your people skills. Who would have thought? I should have known; she was rather overbearing and not very sociable when we first met... but I figured her hunger for order and respect would make her a better social butterfly. Then there was me. I barely had one good friend back home that I can remember... I could bluster and lie, but each time it took a little out of me. She thinks I'm king material for some reason... Why she thought that, still thinks that, I don't know, but it certainly isn't because of how I deal with people. Especially people so diametrically opposed to myself.

Not even ten minutes after managing to infiltrate the party we were surrounded by a crowd of dapper gentlemen and ladies. All their eyes fell on Susan, the girl outshining the other women assembled here. The smitten, curious and the jealous people of wealthy bearing crushed in on the two of us. We easily became the sideshow of the party. The two of us helped improve the mood, so I supposed blending in was all about assured, but the pressure of the crowd of people forming was too much for the two of us. The conversation went on, one noble speaking after the next.

“Mrs. Neval, you were born in the northern wastes? I had heard wandering nomads used to thrive there, but I had thought a decade of drought half a century ago had all but killed them off.”

Susan responded nervously, “No. Small bands do exist. My father being the king of one of those tribes.” Her voice barely managing not to crack but still quivered.

“A princess? How did you manage that my boy?” One of the nobles said turning to me. “A savage but a beautiful one at that. A lord

of dirt may be a worthy punishment for a wife as fine as she."

"Please, darling..." Sighed a scrawny and pale woman beside him. "She has the skin of a peasant. Tanned as it is."

"Yes, 'tis a shame. Her blood may not run blue as ours my good Baron Neval, but do not let those jealous few get you down. Ha ha!" the noble laughed, not one bit at the amusement of the woman beside him who must be his wife.

"She does not carry herself a savage might. Nor even of a peasant." Exclaimed another noble behind the inner ring that had formed around us.

One fat nobleman spoke to the others, "Personally, I detest having to sit and listen to the drivel of those peasants. Every year, for every village in my peerage, deciding who pays who for a fence knocked over by some other bastard son's swine. I wish I could just send a stand in."

"Such simple lives they lead, and they complicate it with being so worried about trivial little things." Another one responds to the first.

"They complain, but one week wracking their dirt clodden heads with keeping the rest of them in line, and they'd rather wallow in the same mud as those pigs of theirs." Joked a third.

"Only swine and fences? I had a poor bastard pound upon the door of my manor house for three days straight. He claimed his only and eldest son had run off into the woods with some horse woman and had not seen him for a week."

"However did you deal with that Count Harold?" asked another noble.

"For three days of annoyance?" Harold snorted, "Locked in the stocks for as many days. Maybe if the bastard son returns, he and his new wife will pull the plow better than his father. I'll just keep him locked there for ruining my sleep after that."

And they all laughed jovially. I guess it was just that type of party, where a bunch of privileged men and women born into wealth made light of and joked about how hard their lives are and how hard they work and deserve to drink fine wine, bread without bits of grindstone in the dough with a distinct lack of fear about starving to

death.

“I have never heard of Burnsworth, Baron Neval,” Mused another noble, tearing my attention back. “Those untamed and dangerous lands to the north. I had heard there was not even a drop of water. How do you expect to settle the area?”

I blustered a likely story, “Aquifers. There is no water, but if you're far enough south from the desert it still rains, so all you need to do is dig deep enough for the ground water.”

A round of nodding and hemming and hawing, as though I had proposed a most novel idea. I suppose there wasn't a farmer assembled here. Anyone sane would probably be doing something productive with their time rather than waste it here. Not once in the past ten minutes of this constant drivel had anyone said anything remotely useful. No slip of the tongue on anything about Duke Billum, the bridge, politics or current events. Everyone was too busy kissing the ass of the person who wore the most gaudy and flashy rings on their fingers or the brightest, most flamboyant and oversized dresses.

“I thought that place was filled with monsters.” Mused another noble. “Can't think it is safe to do anything that far north into the wastes.”

“Monsters running rampant everywhere. Peasants running off with monsters.”

“Even horse women.”

They all laughed once again.

“How dreadful. Considering what the sad bastards do to animals, I'm not surprised they would stoop so low to monsters, even if just an excuse to leave their farms where they belong.

“Monsters. Absolutely disgusting, indeed.”

I noticed Susan's dress flutter behind her for a moment as though her tail kicked up, and when I looked at her face, she was doing her best not to furrow them in anger and trying to keep from balling up her fingers into a fist.

I had to spring into action, “Perhaps one or more of you have seen Duke Billum? I suppose he would come to greet everyone eventually.”

“I hope you don't have business with him.” A noble said, “He doesn't often join the parties, even if he is so kind to host and finance them. But do not let your visit be a waste because of that, you must tell us, how someone like you managed to marry a woman as beautiful as she.”

“Did you have to best her father or a brother in mortal combat?” Asked another.

I tried, but the topic changed quickly back onto the two of us so suddenly. I was so flustered that I hadn't a thing to say.

“Nothing so barbaric.” Susan responded quickly, quicker than I thought she would. “He did defeat a foe to my family in combat for my hand. He did so with both hands tied behind him, all the while risking his life for my own.”

“Oh my. Like a tale of romance,” a noble woman swooned.

“He was so brave, so just and kind, I would not accept any other conclusion than our marriage.”

“So, the lady talks so jovially and freely and only of her husband. How jealous I am.”

The nobles surrounding us laughed again, and the two of us shrunk in embarrassment.

Susan recovered quickly enough as she seemed she had something more to say, “Yes, of my husband I am glad to speak at-Ack!”

With a clonk, something small, fast and round collided with Susan's forehead. Raising her hands to her forehead where a red mark was left we all looked down to the ground to see an acorn. While everyone else continued to look down I looked up to see Rose sitting on a tree branch, high above us. An acorn rested in her claw which she tossed up into the air and caught. She looked back at me and gave me a wink and a grin. I furiously glared back at her and mouthed silently, 'What the hell are you doing?'

“Are you alright Mrs. Neval?” Asked one of the ladies.

She tried to comfort her with a gentle hand on her shoulder, but Susan brushed her off before she could touch her.

“It is nothing, thank you.” She moaned.

“Acorns falling in spring?” A noble puzzled.

“Acorns do not fall so fast either.” Another said.

Great. Have to settle this out now too.

“Well, this kind of tree, the Ballistic Oak, they grow on a desert far across the sea in the south. They form acorns ready to fall sooner than normal. There are times of little wind, few animals to carry them away. If they grow too close to the parent, they'll starve each other, so they shoot out with force like that.”

Anything to keep them from looking up. Just listen to me and my bullshit, please... This isn't going to work.

“Is that so? Most puzzling,” One of the nobles nodded. “Duke Billum is known for gathering strange things in his garden after all.”

All the other nobles looked at one another and nodded in agreement as they looked at me differently now, a little more respect than before.

“So well learned and traveled too,” A lady sighed.

“Certainly a lucky lad and lady,” The man beside her added.

“Oh, certainly. I would never do any worse than the best, and there certainly is no one who compare to my dear husband.” Susan boasted, puffing her chest up proudly. “Of all the women who courted him, I would not lose to any, and neither would any of them-eek!”

A second acorn, this time making a clonk twice as loud as the first collided with Susan's forehead, on the exact same red mark as before. While everyone looked to see if Susan was okay, I saw Rose sitting in the tree, her grin was gone, and she looked a little annoyed now. I looked back over to Susan who appeared to have noticed Rose as well. Her eyes flashed with a frightening murderous glare. Just as quickly as she flashed that death threat of a glare, she looked back down with the same calm demure look upon her face to put everyone worried about her at ease.

“Are you sure we are safe below this tree Baron Neval?”

“Yes. I am certain enough. It is rare that it would drop two so quickly.” I stressed my next words rather sternly, “I'm sure it won't happen more than twice in a row.”

The nobles didn't seem entirely convinced, and they hung around nervous until the womenfolk started gushing again.

“I have wanted to ask; how do you manage to get your hair so straight?” One round noblewoman asked Susan while fanning herself daintily.

“You must absolutely tell us your secret.” jokingly begged a second.

“I do not do anything in particular.” Susan said

I'm pretty sure her hair had always been like that, even after waking up. An insult to women everywhere who spend so much time combing and blow drying. I think I understood the subtle dread in Susan's face. She has absolutely nothing to impart and thereby nothing to connect with these ladies on any level. Every other question from the ladies surrounding us seem to be about just that too...

“So humble and beautiful too,” a noble continued her outburst. “I simply cannot see how any man would ever choose anyone but someone such as you. I am sure there are many ladies tonight who can sigh in relief. Who could compete with- ouch!”

A third acorn, as hard as the second, collided with the forehead of the lady. Unlike Susan with her monstrous constitution, the poor lady wavered on her feet and fell backwards, luckily to be caught by those standing behind her. There was a short chorus of yelps and screams in shock. Everyone rushed over to the poor girl and crowded around.

“Three times now? Surely this tree is not safe. But how does it keep doing this?” A noble asked me.

I shrugged my shoulders, “Magic?”

“A magic tree? As expected of Duke Billum.”

“Please. We must get this lady some fresh air and water.”

“Stand away from the tree, it isn't safe for now. Not so long as it is shedding acorns thusly.”

I was dumbfounded. Just how empty were the heads of these people? I was at a complete loss, as was Susan who shared the same dumbfounded look upon her face as we watched the nobles disperse and go back about their business. Just a few seconds later, it was just the two of us standing beneath the tree. When we both looked up, Rose seemed to have vanished, and when we looked back at one another, we both laughed. I think we were just glad to be left alone.

“She sort of helped... In her own way.” I said.

“That will not prevent me from throttling her when next we meet,” Susan replied.

“Let's just take the chance we have and find Billum for now.”

Susan extended her hand. It took me a second, but with her impatient stare I eventually got the picture and took her hand in mine, and we walked down the path toward the and away from the garden. While all the other noblemen and noblewomen chatted away we slipped between them. We were desperate not to be stopped again. I'm sure we were both running on empty. I'm not sure if I had enough left in me to scramble and deal with a crush of people and attention like that again. I didn't think our luck would last long though. Just a feeling.

“Ah~ there she is.” An older woman's voice called out to us.

Susan and I stopped dead in our tracks, mid step. Neither of us wanted to turn around, but we both did reluctantly and in sync. Coming toward us was a ball. No, a woman that looked like a ball. On the short side and with chubby arms, legs, a belly that protruded too far to be healthy and a fat head that made her look like a sphere. I wasn't sure how anyone tailored a dress to fit and keep all that into such a perfect sphere. On her left and right were a collection of four maids, each dressed in the frilly black and white classical attire. They all looked eerily like one another. As if they were quadruplets.

“Excuse us?” I asked pensively.

I didn't get another word in before I was nearly knocked over when the bowling ball of a woman nearly failed to come to a stop in front of us and reached out to grab and pry Susan away from me and shook her hands up and down furiously.

“Oh my. Dear me. You are just absolutely gorgeous. A work

of art. The finest sculptor with the finest marble or ivory could do no better."

"Can-I-be-of-assist-ance-Mam?" Susan tried to say, her voice coming through disjointed, as though through a fan, as her body was pulled up, down, forward and back.

"Oh, silly me. I did forget to introduce myself. I am Martha Billum. Duchess Billum."

Both our eyes lit up. Maybe our luck wasn't so bad after all.

"Mrs. Neval," Susan curtsied. "And my husband, Baron Neval."

The tone and inflection in her voice... and the courtesy... She was pouring it on thick now.

"Oh, how precious and polite you are. I just want to gobble you up."

I wish she hadn't said that, now I couldn't get it out of my head. The horrible image of how this woman got to the condition and shape she was in.

"You absolutely must join me for tea. You must. It would be my privilege. No. A gift, the best gift you could give me."

"We were hoping we'd get a chance to talk to the good Duke, madam." I said bowing with a professionally warm smile on my face. "We would be honored to-"

"Not you." She said curtly.

Wow. That was rude. Looked like Susan didn't take that too well either.

"Listen now you roun- mmhmm~ hmph!"

I shot my hand over Susan's mouth and muffled her. Turning us around and facing our backs toward the Duchess, I whispered into her ears.

"Just do it, Susan. This is the chance we need."

"Certainly not. My fur stands on edge simply looking upon her. She is most strange and worrisome."

“This is your plan right? I can't do everything. If there's a chance you can get from her what we need, then you have to.”

Susan tried to stare me down, but I glared back. Eventually her stone face melted, and she sighed.

“Very well. For you, Pharaoh. I will undertake this mission.” Turning around and putting on a refreshed smile Susan glowed toward the Duchess. “It would be my pleasure, madam.”

The duchess clapped her meat hooks in a blur in front of her, the embodiment of excitement, “Oh joyous night. Come now, to my chambers. We will have tea and biscuits. Much to talk about. Much to show you. Come now darling.”

The maids surrounded Susan on all corners, and even as she looked around confused and back to me with a tinge of fear in her eyes, she was marched off with the duchess nearly skipping away in the lead. It had all happened so quickly, but they all vanished into the villa. Your sacrifice will not be in vain, Susan. There wasn't any time for me to waste either. I had to search for the Duke, and if I couldn't find him, I'd have to steal his seal.

Nonchalantly strolling then darting behind the columns and pillars near the villa and the garden, I started my search for an entrance. They all appeared locked, until I spotted a servant's entrance. Every so often a butler or maid rushed to and fro from the door with linen, cutlery or food and wine from the kitchen. I hid myself behind a column and waited for the door to swing open and another servant to rush out back into the garden. Not just forty seconds later a sharply dressed man did just that. With a few quick and silent leaps, I stuck my foot in the door before it could close. Slipping inside, I quickly scanned down the hallways, but didn't spot another soul. Using that chance, I quickly searched and found stairs leading upwards and away from the servants’ quarters.

Leaving the servant's area of the villa, I left the dull and drab area to one of opulent wealth, vibrant red painted walls, hard wood finish on the walls and floor with a forest green rug. Pedestals stood with works of art from vases to statues or marble to gold as far as the eye can see. If I had to check every room in this place, I'd never have enough time in the two or so hours we had left to get what we came for. Seeing it for myself and realizing how little time there was set me to worry. Panic would inevitably follow.

I started to feel cramped in the stuffy air of the empty and eerie villa hallways with creepily identical rooms. I ducked out past some veranda doors onto a balcony, a large wide balcony that seemed to be above the main entrance to the villa itself. Two stories down below was the garden where all the nobles gathered, feasting, chatting, partying. How jealous I was of them that they could not have a care in the world tonight.

“Heya! How's it going?” A voice called to me.

I spun around to see Rose leap from a branch on one of the tall garden trees and grab hold of the balcony railing. Pulling herself up with ease she sat down, legs crossed, fiery tail flicking back and forth behind her.

“Can you not sit there. Someone is going to see you, Rose.” I said nervously, almost demanding.

Rose didn't seem offended, she pushed off the railing and walked toward me. Right up to me.

“If you say so.” She said with a cocky grin on her face.

“Did you really have to go and throw acorns at everyone?”

“And let the mutt say what she wants thinking I can't do anything about it? No way.”

“And the other girl?”

“Deserved it.”

I could tell anything I said wasn't going to do much good. It was obvious just from looking at her and how she stood there. But that's all she did, stand there. She looked as though she had come all this way to say something important, so I was patient at first, but we were on a tight schedule, and I didn't have the time for games.

When I was about to turn around, Rose started to say something, “Husband, I-” Then she stopped and pulled away slightly.

I had almost turned around completely, but I turned back to face her again. If she was going to say something, I wish she'd just spit it out. She had to realize we were in a hurry here. Rose didn't say anything though. For a good ten seconds, I stared at her and her at me. Until she was about to say something again only to be interrupted

by the sound of music. A trope of musicians had gathered and started playing in the garden below, the nobles applauded and started to gather in a wide open space, pairing off, hand in hand.

I'm not sure if I was following Rose, or just moving in the same direction under the influence of the same curiosity, but we both went over to the balcony and looked down. The first few warmup notes having been played, the small symphony began to play. The song that played sounded so very familiar. It was a waltz. The name Tchaikovsky popped into my head, even though I had no idea who that was. After a short introduction, the main chorus started to play, a slow and beautiful melody, and the nobles paired up and in their fine apparel began to dance.

I looked over at Rose and her amber eyes lit up, her tail set ablaze in excitement as well. When I realized I had stared too long at her, it was too late. She locked her eyes with mine, heedlessly expectant.

“Oh ho, no no.” I said waving my hands. “We don't have the time to-”

“We do too.” Rose pouted. “You were just walking around inside the villa doing nothing anyway.”

“Yeah. And I need to get back to that. We only got a couple hours to-”

“Two hours.” Rose said impatiently. “Come on! One dance.”

“No really, Rose. We don't-”

Anything else I had to say didn't matter because Rose seized my hands in her claws and pulled me toward her. Placing one hand of my hands on her slim, taut waist, taking my other in her own and placing her other free claw on my shoulder she held me close and forced me into taking the first couple of steps. If I didn't want to trip, I had to keep up and not a moment sooner she was pushing me along as I was forced to take the lead or be overwhelmed.

It was an odd pairing. Rose—with her sword sheathed on her back and her two piece underwear she wore as clothing, far more bronze skin showing than clothing covering her, with only the red scale armor made from her own molted scales over the cups of the string top and the black string bottom, with her crocodilian tail crested in fire sputtering embers as she got excited and whipping back and forth,

with her long red ponytail tied with the scruff black ribbon tied in her hair dancing to and fro above her tail—stood like an exotic beacon. Then there was me, in my dapper attire, the coat, the pants, the boots and socks, the frills and the hat. I'm not sure you could imagine a pair more opposed in appearance to each other dancing there under the moonlight.

With the melody playing only just below us and the half moon above, we stepped in a circle and kept spinning slowly round and round. I was rather cross and showed it on my face, but the salamander was all smiles. Her clawed feet moved with perfect precision. I thought it was rather unexpected and unbecoming of a warrior. Then again, she had surprised me like this before. I had to ask.

"Where did you learn to dance, Rose? I figured fighting was the only thing that interests you."

"One of my first jobs, I did a little bodyguard work for a group of traveling music guys."

"Musicians."

"Yeah. Music cans. Traveled with 'em for about five months. Back before I worked for the guild. Poor pay. Not a lot of action, but I was only ten or something like that."

Music cans? Dammit Rose. You really need to listen better...

"Ten? You were doing bodyguard work that young?"

"Salamanders got fighting in their blood."

"And dancing?"

"Like fighting."

Okay, how I am not surprised?

"Like fighting," she repeated herself. "See? Step left, step right."

Moving her feet gracefully and with precision she then bent her arm and my own at the elbow to block our chests.

"Guard. Turn. Parry. Thrust. Dodge. Spin. Thrust."

She said as she spun us around a hundred and eighty degrees, pulled my arm along with her to swat away something invisible, stepped a large step forward with our arms then extended far in front of us then, sidestepped far out of the way, spun back to our original facing and then took a particularly large step forward.

Now I'm really not surprised.

"See?" She said, all smiles. "Just like fighting. Moves are the same, just no weapon and no target."

"Yeah. I see. And who taught you?"

"No one taught me."

I had to take a few moments to digest that as the music hit a small crescendo and Rose pulled the both of us along for a quick spin until the music slowed down again.

"No one taught you?" I asked skeptically.

"I just watched." She said plainly.

"Just watched?"

"Yeah. Just watched. Watch how their feet move. Where their arms are. It's easy. I followed those music cans for a while. They played at lot of dances, and I watched the people from the side."

Something like that is certainly not easy. Is she trying to tell me she commits to muscle memory what she sees? Just what is up with this girl?

"So you dance often then?"

"Nope." Rose said bluntly.

Oh come on now. This conversation is just getting silly now.

"You can dance this well, and you say you don't dance often?"

"Not ever."

Okay, now it's over getting there, it's now ridiculous.

"I'm not buying it. You said you were only ten, how long ago

was that? That's gotta be about-”

“It's true.” Rose said, then went quiet.

Other than the tink of my boots and her talons on the stone and the music playing from below, there wasn't another sound to be heard. Still the two of us continued to step and waltz in a circle from one side of the balcony to the other under the moon light. Until she finally said what was stuck in her throat.

“If there ain't many who'd want to dance with, well-”

Both our eyes fell on where our feet were. My boots stepping in synch with her red hybrid legs. My hand and her claw were joined, a red scaly reptilian arm from the elbow down. She stopped mid-way, but I think I understood. No. I understood. I clenched my fingers and held on tighter. I don't know why, but I did. Rose looked back up at me; her eyes glistening. She then rested her head against my chest. I simply carried on matching my steps with hers. The mood was somber, yet there was a hint of joy, but the silence was killing me. My heart was beating fast in my chest, and I had to get the nervousness and air out of my lungs, so I had to keep talking.

“I think I remember hearing a song like this back home. A few of the instruments sound different, but the melody is pretty similar. I think it was about flowers or something.”

“Flowers?” Rose said, seeming to doubt me. “To me it sounds like an army foraging in the meadow. A hearty meal before the battle tomorrow.”

“You would think that, wouldn't you?”

“If it's about flowers, it could very well be about me.”

“Guess you're not too far off then.”

Rose laughed and that caused me to laugh as well. At least that feeling from before was gone now. My body felt a little lighter, and I don't think I was shaking or sweating as much as before.

“And where did you learn to dance, husband?” Rose inquired.

I guess this question was inevitable. I wasn't too sure, but unlike before in the Greasy Goose, when I was being pulled around,

my feet knew exactly where they needed to go. I thought about it. I didn't expect it to do any good, but a flood of images, all in black and white, came to me. When I didn't reply right away, with my head in the clouds, Rose called out to me and brought me back.

"-I said, 'what's wrong?'"

I shook my head, "I think I just had a little flashback."

"Oh? Of what?"

"When I was a kid. A Christmas pageant."

"What's a Chris mass?"

"No idea," I said flatly. "Some type of show we kids put on for our parents. I think... There was this girl I liked. Curly blonde hair, blue eyes. I don't think we were older than ten, but she looked very mature to me. I think I had a crush on her." I looked down to see Rose pouting, forcing me to recover. "H-hey, you're the one who asked. I don't even remember her name or what her face really looked like. Anyway. There was a dance. A part of a bigger show. No guy volunteered for it, and she looked so excited to do it. I'm sure she would have been crushed if it got canceled, so I took my chance."

"And then?" she asked excitedly like a kid.

The music playing down below had reached its final crescendo and even though I was telling my story, we spun round and round faster and faster in rhythm with the music.

"We did it. Everyone laughed at me though. They said my eyes were wide open like a deer caught in headlights the whole time. I'm pretty sure I was shaking with stage fright the whole time too. I thought I had done it so well too, I did every step perfectly. I practiced really hard for two weeks. I had to. I never had danced before. All that is probably why I remember all the steps now."

"And her?"

"She still didn't talk to me afterward. She wasn't happy at all that I was the one to dance with her. I don't think I was all that popular back then. Probably ruined the night for her too. Embarrassing her despite trying so hard."

I chuckled. "Stupid me for thinking dancing with a girl was

enough to have her fall for me."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Laven." Rose chuckled.

As the music had reached its final crescendo during my story and was now dying down, the two of us slowed down and eventually come to a stop, still holding onto each other. I looked down at her with a confused look, and she looked up at me.

With a shy smile on her face, instead of the usual sly grin, she said to me, "It's working pretty good right now."

Just a few choice words and I felt a hammer blow against my chest. Her face was flushed red, even after the punchline; there was no grin, no gotcha or anything. Rose... Was that from the heart? The music had come to a complete stop, applause echoed from below as we stared deeply into each other's eyes. Even when there was a loud crackle pop, whizzing and explosions high above us as the ground around us was bathed in vibrant yellows, blues, greens and other colors, we weren't distracted at all.

Whatever was holding Rose back was gone now as she wouldn't be stopped now, "Laven, I love—"

Even with the crackle of fireworks ahead, I knew what I heard, and I only had one thing to say, "I know."

My heart was beating hard, almost louder than the fireworks. One hand still rested upon her smooth waist, my other upon her shoulder. Her claws pressed up against my chest, clinging onto my jacket. I felt she was getting closer, pressing up slowly on her toes. I felt my neck craning downward, and my back bending forward. We both turned our heads sideways as we got closer to one another. I watched her half open and dreamy eyes close shut, and I did the same.

Suddenly, I froze when a quiet sound, but one I was listening for carefully and subconsciously, caused my ear to twitch. The veranda doors were shaking, and someone was twisting the knob to swing them open. A boost of adrenaline shot through me as I stepped back as did Rose. Spinning on her heel she leaped onto the railing, turned around and dropped down, quietly out of sight.

Appearing through the door was a bald old man; his face seemed wrinkled, yet almost saintly, a smug knowing face with a smile. Beside him were a pair of armed guards, each with a sinister looking halberd and laden down with bits and pieces of plate covering

their vital points. They seemed relaxed though, at ease, as was the luxuriously dressed nobleman between them. He wasn't too short, but he was still quite pudgy and fat but not comically so for his height was reasonable and his shoulders wide. A pair of piercing brown eyes looked me over as he stepped onto the balcony and walked toward me.

“Ah, Baron Neval, I presume!” He shouted in a friendly manner, as though greeting an old friend again.

He shot out his fat pudgy fingers at me, for a handshake I presumed. I obliged him and he violently shook my hand up and down.

“Yes. I heard a little about you. I didn't think to find you all the way up here, alone. Are you dissatisfied with the festivities below?”

The questions caught me off guard as he seemed like one to talk at length from his first impression, “No- I- Of course not Sir. I merely enjoy getting a bird's eye view on things. It was nice and relaxing up here. A nice break from the other guests below.”

The old man shook his finger at me with a grin on his face, “I know. Exactly. What you mean. I think you and I could get along. Get to know one another. How about it? Tea and a talk in my chambers?”

The man had walked over to the balcony and faced me now. He seemed like he would not be undeterred from getting into my face; the guards on his flanks followed him like shadows. From the balcony, I looked down to see a claw grab hold on the edge. Pulling herself up effortlessly back onto the railing and balancing there without making a sound was Rose, looming behind the three men with a serious and menacing glare. She crouched and held onto the railing with nothing but her taloned feet while she had her other hand on the hilt of her sword, ready to strike.

I had to shake my head and shout out, "No, wait. Don't!"

The man, his guards and Rose all jerked in surprise when I yelled. My eyes were not on the men, but on Rose who shot me a look as if to ask, 'You sure?' to which I nodded. Slowly letting go of her hilt, she loosened up and quietly leaped back down, catching the edge of the balcony below the railing with her claws and then dropping back out of sight again. By the time the guards turned around to see what I was looking at, Rose was long gone.

"Don't! I mean, no! That man over by the tulip garden

shouldn't mix that cheese with that wine... Sorry. Bad habit and pet peeve of mine."

He looked over to where I was looking, right at the first guy I had laid eyes on, stuffing himself at a table with plenty of hors-d'oeuvre on it, "Oh, I do hate it when they do that too... But, what say you to a little finer dining and beverages?"

“Well, I-” I flustered. “I don't see why I would refuse, Sir-?” I inquired, hoping he would spare me further embarrassment.

“Duke Billum, my god boy. But you can call me Francis.” the man said with a glowing white smile.

Well now, what are the chances?

Chapter 35

High above the gardens where the nobles had gathered, high above the balcony under the moonlight, I followed the pudgy old man. Up the luxurious staircases I followed Duke Billum, Lord of Beitterheim, as he guided me to his chamber. A security detail of two armed guards followed beside him, one on his left and one on his right. He must have been quite the paranoid old man to have all these safety measures along with not attending to his own party. No guard appeared to escort me as I follow about eight steps behind, a feeling I'm afraid I'd become all too used to recently, so this hands off approach was rather refreshing.

From the second floor to the third and finally the forth, the highest story of this ridiculously large house was home to two things: A small museum filled with art and artifacts, what importance or value they had I haven't the slightest, and a single room, the Duke's quarters. A sturdy pair of oaken doors stood guard at the entrance; each with a mural carved in it no doubt depicting important historical or mythical events in analogies with cultural significance that was beyond me. I felt like I was walking into a cathedral rather than a bedroom, the size of the room inside making that perhaps not an exaggeration. Much of the room was unnecessary open space, a large bed on the far wall, a hearth with a table and chair set up, a small corner for a wardrobe, all these quaint things only took up a fifth of the entire room. Candlelight lit the room, and the moonlight shined through the stained glass giving off the feeling of a cathedral.

Already standing over the table and chairs were another two guards. Guarding a hot and freshly brewed tea set? I thought the man's paranoia was reaching extreme and ridiculous levels. One of the guards poured a cup as the Duke approached, satisfied with all his precautions in place, he sat down and helped himself. I stood for a moment, mostly to admire the stained glass murals, the pervading theme around a particular coat of arms told me it was probably about the Billum family linage. It was simply of a black bridge spanning a blue river underneath, I think that just reinforced how old and important that hunk of stone is around here. Since it spanned the whole length of the wall, I assumed it must go back centuries at least, maybe even a millennium.

The atmosphere wasn't tense; it was instead rather calming, except for myself, so I sat down rather than risk offending Billum. I sat down to an empty tea cup which was only poured after I sat. Having been burned before, I took my chance to look inside the cup, no oily

veneer, or powder lining the cup, so far so good. Seeing the Duke indulge, I followed suit. No dizziness or heavy eyelids and no bitter aftertaste. Seemed like all was fine. The guards hiding their faces behind their visors, standing like statues and all the silence did make things a little uncomfortable... Was I supposed to say something?

Billum finally broke the awkward silence, “So, Mr. Neval, I hope you have found my party to your liking.”

“A firework display. Very lively Duke Billum.” I replied.

“Call me Francis, if you will.”

“Alright. Francis?”

I said it skeptically, but he smiled weakly after hearing it. Afterwards he didn't say a thing more and went back to his tea.

I was beginning to wonder why I was brought here in the first place. The guards hadn't moved, and Billum was still sipping away at his tea without hardly saying a thing; the only sound, if I held my breath and listened closely, was the garden party down below.

“I have never heard of Burnsworth before,” Billum said at last. “I do recall hearing of attempts to send prospectors to the more northern reaches... But the returns were too low given the risks involved. Desert wastelands without a drop of water to drink. Forests crawling with monsters and vast inhospitable tundra beyond that. To tame them would be a heroic task indeed.”

“Well, I think we've learned a lot since those times. We find the veins, and we can make a profit and bring in the food, water and supplies needed. The tribes up there like to wear their gold; it has to be up there. A little bribery here and there goes a long way to placate the... natives...”

“Yes, the golden ornaments of your wife.” Billum said disinterested. “I would say they put many of the other ladies gathered here tonight to shame. They do not appear like any design I've ever seen though. And I have gathered a lot in my collection.”

Now it was silent again. I couldn't ignore how even though I was a guest, Billum seemed terrible at keeping a conversation going. I wasn't much better, but I had an excuse, the less I talked, the less chance I had to stick my foot in my mouth and trip over my lies. I'm sure I could survive just playing off whatever the Duke said, so get to it

you old fart.

No matter how loudly I swore, cursed and insulted him in my head, he silently kept sipping at his tea. Was he uncomfortable? Was he even more woefully unsociable than Susan and I combined? I was running out of options; I was going to have to go nuclear. I would have to just risk it and bring up talking about passage over the bridge.

“Say, Franc-”

“It is a good tea, isn't it?” He rudely interrupted.
“Well I-”

“Imported from an island far to the east. They said not to serve it in cups like this, but I won't have that. I always drink tea like this.”

“I suppose-”

“Not my favorite. Too bitter and bland, it doesn't go well with sugar or tea either. I paid quite well for it. I do not think I will have Sebastian stock it anymore.”

Asshole. I couldn't get a word in. He kept interrupting me every time I tried to talk. Was he doing it on purpose?

“I apologize. I do not invite people into my quarters often...” His voice sullen and apologetic.

“I-”

“Truly. I ask for your permission, to excuse me for a moment, to give myself a chance to make myself comfortable.”

Anything if it meant we could carry on. After spotting an old fashioned pendulum clock above the fireplace, and I noticed that I only had about an hour until midnight. I was running out of time as is.

“Don't mind me. Do what you need to do, Francis.”

With a smile, he pushed himself away from the table and waddled over to the far corner of the room. I watched him go until I noticed the two guards were now standing on either side of me. I'm not sure how or when they flanked me but I didn't like it. When I looked back toward the Duke, he had already disappeared behind the folding screen set up near the wardrobe. What the hell was going on?

“Stay where you are, sir.” Said one of the guards. “Humor the Duke so we don't have to do anything rash.”

“Not a word either,” warned the other. “To anyone.”

Now the awkwardness was replaced by a foreboding feeling of dread.

“Evening~ Big Bro!” Came a high pitched girly voice from somewhere in the room.

The feeling of foreboding came to an abrupt halt, a train wreck as it went off the rails. It didn't spill over into awkwardness either; it turned right over into bewilderment. The voice calling to me wasn't connected to what it should, and coming skipping from the other side of the wardrobe was a tub of lard dressed in a frilly summer dress without shoes and a golden curly wig. My heart sunk, and my brain was sent reeling. There wasn't really any mistaking what was happening, but I still wanted to.

“I'm so~ glad to have someone to join me for tea, it has been ever so long.” The girly voice giggled and chirped.

It was an impressive show of ventriloquism. A good joke alright. Now I just waited for the punchline.

“Such a kind Big Brother you are, putting time aside for little old me, your little sis.”

Okay, now we'd gone too far. Then a voice echoed in the back of my head.

“Uhh...” Rose groaned, “You do know rumors about Billum? That he's a bit of a looney?”

A bit of a looney? No. This was more than a little looney. A fat old and socially awkward old man in drag and a curly golden wig with drills. All that lard barely fitting into a dress a couple sizes too small. I was about to freak out, and I stood up on reflex only to be pushed back into my seat by the two guards standing beside me.

“I said stay seated, sir.” Whispered one of them.

“Play along for your own good.” Whispered the other.

A loud bang echoed throughout the room; I think it came from

the door. The guards turned to look at it, while Billum ignored it or perhaps in his delusional state simply didn't hear it at all. Even as the banging continued again and again, the guards merely exchanged glances, nodded and two of them went to investigate it. I watched them for a while, but something else more pressing and horrifying was vying for my attention in front of me.

Humming a little tune, Billum picked up the tea kettle and refilled my cup. That voice didn't match the lumbering ugly frame of the man inside the dress and under the wig. I think I was staring wide-eyed with fright for too long because Billum began to blush, place his sausage fingers on his cheeks and squirm on the spot.

“Oh Big Bro, you perv.” He giggled. “Do you like my dress that much? You gave it to me for my ninth birthday after all. I love it so much. It's my favorite!”

I chuckled nervously through gritted teeth. Play along right? Maybe I will if that will make it stop sooner.

“Birthday huh? N-ninth eh? Well, Francis, it's been your favorite for a while then? Had it f-for a while then.”

“Big Bro~ That's mean. My name is Francesca. I don't like that nickname, and I only turned eleven a few months ago. You meany.” He pouted, rather poorly as well, if he was trying to be cute.

Looney? Yeah definitely not looney. This guy was fucking insane. He thinks he's a little girl! He even sounds like a little girl. How long did he have to practice that? Maybe if it wasn't for his girth and short flabby arms and legs his acting and prancing about—which I felt through the floorboards as his weight nearly crushed the floor underneath—would be a A+ performance as well. As I was still a sane human being, who apparently had not been drugged, I could not possibly be fooled.

“Billum...” I said as calmly and sternly as I could. “Knock it off.”

“No!” He shouted. “You go off and leave me all alone up here forever. When you came back, that's when you got to play with me. You said you would.”

“We've never met bef-”

As I shouted back, two metal fists pushed me down hard

against the chair and crushed my shoulders painfully. Then the two guards pulled me back up straight and pulled me flat against the chair, pinning me down.

“Oh shucks. We finally get to play, but look how late it is.” Billum said woefully, looking at the clock. “It's already bed time.”

I watched with shivers running up my spine as a mischievous grin went spread across his face.

“We can still play a bedtime game! Yay for me! Francesca has been a good girl, so you have to play with her.”

Skipping toward the bed, Billum crawled on top of the covers while the guards wrapped their arms undermine and lifted me out of the chair. I threw my arms and tried to shake them off, but they quickly seized me again, almost as if they were very used to this part as though it was just one step in a regular routine.

“Just do it if you know what's good for you, sir,” One of them said... Again.

“If he breaks character. He'll have you killed,” Warned the other.

“The hell I'll-” I growled.

“Just bad luck, sir. You look similar to him. So you'll just have to bear with it.”

Look similar? Similar to who? I guess I wasn't going to have that answered... I also wasn't totally convinced. I kept resisting, and the guards kept on having to drag me toward the bed. Laying on his stomach on top of the bed, propped up on his elbows and kicking his feet in the air, Billum didn't seem to differentiate between me being dragged toward the bed from me coming willingly. When he turned around, that's when I really started to worry.

“Big Bro~ Let's play doctor. I got a cold, and I need my medicine but my throat is all sore~”

Doctor? You've got to be kidding me and what's he- OH GOD NO!

I got serious and threw my weight into my next bout of struggling, causing the guards to come to a stop as they tried to get

me under control.

“Just forget about it. The door back there is magically sealed. You ain't getting out,” One of my escorts said.

I looked over to the window.

“It's four stories up, sir. You'll die. Just humor the Duke, and when he gets bored, you're free to go,” said the other guard.

A thought wandered into my head.

“So, the window isn't sealed?” I asked.

“I said don't bother. It's four stories up.” The guard responded.

I smirked, “That's all I needed to hear.”

On cue, an object burst a hole in the beautiful stained glass window which sent multicolored shards of glass in every direction. She smashed through feet first and balled into a somersault; a flash of red and fire rotated in the air then slammed into the floor on one knee in a perfect landing. Rising to her feet, Rose rotated her shoulders and cracked her neck before looking over the room. Seeing the two guards by the door, frozen in surprise. Her eyes then focusing on me and my two escorts. That would have been enough as her eyes narrowed into a furious glare, but her eyes couldn't help but dart a little further right. The fierce glare on her face was wiped off in an attosecond. Raising a single eyebrow, she did a double take.

“What in the hells?” She muttered, at a loss for words.

I didn't blame her. There was an old man in girl's clothing with his ass raised into the air- actually I'd rather not think about it.

Instead, I seized upon the opportunity and yanked my right arm loose. It was actually pretty easy; the guards were totally surprised, slack jawed as well as slack bodied. I caught the guard on my right flatfooted, and I slammed my elbow into his nose, giving off an audible crack. The short scream of pain he gave off put things back into motion as I shook off the other guard, who instead of trying to pin me down again, readied his halberd with both hands. Me being disarmed at a serious disadvantage.

“Eek~!” Billum screamed in terror as he threw some of the covers on the bed over himself.

As the other guard bared down on me with his axe head, I too found myself looking for help.

“Rose! A little help!” I yelled as I had to throw my right shoulder back to avoid the sharp spear point from plunging into my chest.

The spear tip tore through the fabric of my coat and frilly shirt and pulled back with a sickening rip. Instead of risk being thrust at again, I grabbed hold of the pole and tried to hold it steady. I nearly fell forwards when the much stronger guard drew it back, but I had caught it soon enough that the flat of the axe head was pressing up against my right side. I wrapped my arm under it and tried to hold it there, but as he pulled to try to free it, the metal edges were grating against my side below my armpit through the layers of fabric of my fancy dress. It was far from the best armor, and I certainly felt the sharp edges through it.

I was staring down the guard, and through his visor I was certain he was staring at me, until his head turned, and he shook in fear as a battle cry rang out behind me. Barreling over my shoulder, the salamander with an inferno blazing behind her like a car's red taillight in low light film crashed into him, sword first. The sharp blade bit down into the man's chest from left shoulder to hip, and he fell backwards screaming. I was left standing there with a halberd pinned under my arm and Rose breathing hard and burning almost out of control. Still reeling from the broken nose, the other guard only managed to clear his hand from his face for long enough to have Rose's own fist with a much greater strength connect hard on the same spot, sending the guard sprawling to the floor, crunching the cartilage even further.

From the door, the other two guards came running over, weapons lowered. Without a moment's hesitation, Rose threw herself in a blur toward the fastest of the two guards, sweeping her blade into the heft of the guard’s pole arm. The guard was thrown slightly back, but he certainly wasn't just any grunt, he held his ground and tried to push back against Rose. The second guard ran past out of reach and kept running right for me instead. Rose watched him go, and tried to back off, but a counterattack from the guard she was pinning forced her to raise her own guard.

I watched as the guard came running at me. I had to shake my head and bring myself back down to earth. I grabbed hold of the pole

in my hands and raised the head to face his charge. One run through with that spear head and I'd be done for, of that I was certain. I was shaking as the guard let out his own battle cry. I didn't know what to do; I only thought to try to brush that spear head away when it came close enough. Thrusting my own spear head toward his, it caught between my spear point and the top of my axe head, so I twisted the pole in my hands and then pushed forward and down and into the floorboards. I hurriedly moved my foot out of the way as the spear point tore through the rug.

We both caught each other looking down at the ground and then back at one another.

“Ha!” I laughed, taunting him.

I suppose my luck was over then because my bad improvised and amateurish footing let him push forward and stumble me backwards a few steps off balance. As I was trying not to fall over backwards, the guard pulled his spear point from the floor and readied himself to skewer me again. There wasn't much to do, other than wait and hope it wasn't fatal. I reflexively squinted my eyes shut, unable to watch it happen, but instead I heard another scream and another thud of metal into wood. After stumbling the last few steps and regaining my balance, I opened my eyes to see a sword protruding from the guard’s shin and sticking into the floor, pinning him on the spot. He fell onto his hands, writhing and screaming.

Behind him, at least ten meters away, Rose's arm was extended, just after the apex of its throwing arc. The halberd bearing down on her was easily sidestepped, she quickly grabbed hold of it with both hands and then brought it down onto her knee which she kicked up, snapping it in half. With the butt end of the pole in her hand and the guard with the axe head, he was undeterred and still in the heat of battle and tried to swing it down, only to have Rose catch it and deflect it with the wooden heft and quickly turn it around and jab the end of it into the man's solar plexus, shattering the wooden haft as she did. The sound of crunching bone was audible over his coughing fit, until both were overshadowed by the thump as the guard's body hit the floor.

The dust settling, Rose flashed me a bright and earnest smile. All is well huh? Except after turning around, I saw Billum had disappeared. I spun around again, and I saw the bastard had snuck around the far wall of the room and was running as fast as his stubby fat legs could carry him.

“Rose!” I shouted out. “That door is magically sealed! Don't let him escape!”

Rose's smile wiped away, and she turned to give chase, but Billum was already too close to the door, and the room was too large. With key in hand, he was about to jam it into the lock and flee. If he closed that behind him, we'd lose him, maybe forever.

From the doorway, a large explosion rocked the room. A cloud of dust, debris and wood fragments splintered everywhere as though a bomb went off. I shielded myself and turned away from the blast, and when the rumbling of the explosion stopped, Rose and I peered from over our guards at an open hole in the far wall where the door used to be. Standing in the doorway, a silhouette, and from that silhouette a pair of red menacing eyes glowing in the darkness.

Sprawled on the floor, thrown a good three meters from the door with torn dress and a wig that had been blown off, Billum tried to get to his feet after being shell-shocked. A clang of metal slammed into the ground, pinning what remained of the dress to the floor and sending the scrambling Billum back to the ground after he hit the snag. A golden staff, held firmly against the ground. A golden staff held firmly in the black paws of Susan, glaring down at the man with a stone face, emotionless, except for the rage burning behind those red eyes.

As the smoke cleared though, except for her legs and paws, Susan appeared in a rather uncharacteristic, well, how do I say it? Gothic lolita maid play?

“Susan?” I called out.

She looked away from Billum and toward me, shocked to see me at all, “Pharaoh? I-” She paused as she realized I had seen her too, dressed as she was and flushed red.

“What's with the get-up?” Rose asked.

“N-nevermind that now!” Susan shouted. “I am here to enact revenge!” She looked back down at Billum who was now cowering in fear. “You. You cut the reigns free on that incurable wife of yours. I have suffered... indignities and unmentionable embarrassments at her hands.”

“Unmentionables?” Rose titled her head.

“She and her maids forced me along with their... their...”

“They forced you to costume play?” I asked.

“I am NOT a doll!” Susan screamed furiously. “I managed to keep them at bay from the dressing room and not reveal my disguise and have them think I merely preferred the... 'dog play'... but my patience has limits! You. Billum. You'll pay for this.”

“Susan, wait!” Rose shouted, running up.

Billum still writhing on the ground in fright looked up with half expecting eyes, only to have Rose's face turn sour, evil and full of malice.

“I'll do it.” She said coldly.

Billum began to shake uncontrollably. The two girls with talons and claws ready closed in on the poor old man.

“Hold it!” I shouted.

All three of them stopped and looked over to me. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I walked toward the gathering by the door. My eyes opened, resolute.

“Make it slow.” I said in a cold menacing grimace as I glared at Billum.

“No! Wait! Please!” Billum screamed, his voice having returned to normal. “Mercy! I'll do anything you want. Just don't kill me!”

“Anything?” The three of us asked in unison.

“Yes anything! Just don't kill me. Don't tell anyone!”

I didn't have to think long.

“We need the proper papers to get over the bridge. No strings attached.” I dictated.

“What? No way!” Billum said flatly.

The three of us went from neutral to 'ready to kill' in a second.

“No wait! Anything but that. Money? Land? It's yours! But the bridge has been under stewardship of my family for over a thousand years. I cannot be threatened or blackmailed for it. Without a

proper contract or exchange... I'd never allow it. A blank marque could bankrupt my whole family!"

"Then you are of no use to us." Susan said coldly, raising her staff into the air.

"Hold it, Susan." I said grabbing onto her staff and holding it steady.

I looked back down at Billum, the dress he was wearing and then back at Susan whose disguise was broken.

"Susan, what happened to your disguise?"

"As I said before, I momentarily lost control of my temper, and it was dispelled. The surprise caused the Duchess and her maids to faint. I tied, gagged them and then proceeded to interrogate the Duchess on the moment she regained consciousness. She informed me the Duke was up then ran up here to enact my revenge."

I leaned over and whispered to Susan, "And that's like an illusion spell, right? You could cast it on someone else. With better results?"

"Correct. A willing subject." Susan whispered back.

"Alright. I have a plan then." I turned back to Billum. "Very well, Billum. You want an exchange. I have one for you. One you will not refuse. You give us a marque to cross your bridge. In return, Shoshana will transform you into the form you have always wanted."

Rose and Susan both looked at me with the same confused expression.

Rose quizzically asked, "But isn't it only-mmMm?" before I threw my hand in front of her face and raised my finger to my lips to shush her.

Billum hadn't seen it; his eyes were unfocused, slightly glazed over, thinking through the proposal.

"Pharaoh, I am sure I can perform such a spell, but it is still only an ill- mmph?" Susan tried to speak before I had to throw my free hand over her mouth as well, giving her a wink.

Trust me.

Both the girls nodded, so I removed my hand from the mouths, by that time Billum had snapped back to reality and sat back up on his knees in the middle of the circle we had formed around him.

“You can really... Change me into my true form? The one I was born with? Even as the years robbed me of my ability to hide my ugly self? In my youth, I was so free, but now...” Billum lamented, holding his gut in one hand and his other hand stroking his fat chubby cheeks.

“Yeah, yeah.” I said almost dismissively. We needed to hurry this up. Time was still ticking. Shoshana's magic is at its zenith right now. If we don't do it now, you'll miss your chance.”

“A monster's magic though...” Billum mumbled, toiling with his doubts.

“Yes or no, Billum?” I said, giving my ultimatum.

“Yes! Please yes! This is what I wanted my whole life!”

Blocking the door, the three of us watched Billum rush over to a small desk hidden away in the room. Producing a piece of paper, he eagerly started his pen strokes. Retrieving from behind a locked and hidden compartment in the desk, he revealed his seal, and authorized the document. He earnestly ran back toward us with the paper in hand.

“One marque of passage over the Marru River.” I held out my hand to receive it, but he pulled it back. “After you hold up your end of the bargain!”

I sighed, but he seemed crazy enough with that look in his eyes to tear it up and die otherwise. So I nodded to Susan. She didn't seem to understand what was going on, but she began a ritual anyway. Planting the golden staff onto the ground and letting it go, leaving it to balance perfectly. With her paws around it like a fortune teller around a crystal ball, she focused on the scales hanging perfectly steady.

“Focus your mind on the form you wish to assume, Duke. It shall be so.”

Standing as pencil thin with his eyes squinted and fists clenched, Billum nervously stood as still as he could. Muttering something over and over again under his breath. Susan's exclamation mark tattoos glowed white and emitted a brilliant brightness that flooded the whole room with light, forcing me to close my eyes. Once

the flash subsided, standing before us was a short little girl, someone who couldn't be older than twelve with flowing golden locks. The form was definitely cute and adorable, but I know well enough and looking at it put a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

With a shredded dress now many times too large, Billum opened his eyes and down and the small arms and legs. Doing a pirouette and prancing around laughing happily.

“Yay! At long last!” He squealed at the top of his lungs.

On one pass, he handed over the rolled up marque into my hand and rushed off to the corner of the room where the wardrobe was. After a few moments, he appeared again wearing a perfectly fitting dress, just like the last one.

“I must go meet my guests! At long last I can face them with heart! I am ashamed no longer! Thank you! Big Bro!” He said cheerfully, glowing as he ran past the three of us and down the hallway.

After watching him go, and hearing him giggle down the hallway, Susan asked, “Pharaoh? What is the meaning of all this?”

After a scream from the other side of the room, Rose came back, wiping the blood from her sword to ask as well, “Yeah... What was all that about?”

I looked over at the clock on the wall. It was ten minutes to midnight.

“Later. Right now, we need to start running... Now.”

Sensing the urgency in my voice, the three of us rushed down the hallways, leaped down the stairs and exited the villa through one of the side entrances. The Garden outside had long been abandoned as the guests had moved in doors to the main ball room, so the three of us rushed through the garden. Without candlelight, we only had the moonlight, light from the villa and Rose's fiery tail to guide us.

"That spell will run its course soon, Laven." Susan called out as we ran. "Why would you trick him like that? We had him at our mercy to have our revenge. Why release him?"

"You heard him Susan. He's going to go meet his guests. In a dress he put on after he changed forms. A dress many times too small."

"I still do not-"

"For your own sake, don't think about it." I shouted back. "I think I'll have sent a better message this way than anything else we could have done to him.

Cutting through the gate, we bulldozed through a meager resistance of hapless guards and butlers attending the entrance to the villia. Not even a single alarm was triggered, or warning given. No one would expect a bunch of rogues like us to be escaping out the front entrance like this. We didn't really have the time to be subtle about anything right now though. Waiting on the road leading to the villa, a bunch of carriages were waiting still. Approaching at a run, the driver of the nearest carriage saw us approach, but he was much too slow to do anything about it as Rose scurried and climbed up the ladder to the driver's seat.

“We're commandeering this carriage!” She barked.

“Commandeer!” Susan and I yelled out as we swung open the door to the carriage.

“Right... So outta the way!” She yelled at the driver.

The poor confused and frightened man got a boot to the chest from Rose and was thrown into the dirt below. Wiping the reigns, the horses neighed in surprise, but set off at a gallop. Susan and I tried to hold onto something as the carriage took off suddenly, and I only managed to just shut the door so as to not fly out as we took off as fast as the wheels and road would let us.

After pulling away from the other carriages, their drivers no doubt alarmed at what just happened; I noticed the white luminescent glow on Susan's stomach tattoos fade away.

“Pharaoh, the spell has run its course,” Susan advised me.

“Yeah, I know,” I calmly replied.

Susan was silent for a few seconds.

“Why the form of a little girl?” She asked.

“Please don't ask,” I begged. "Just, don't think about it. At all. There's only really bad mental pictures waiting for you. I wouldn't

wish them upon anyone."

“I told ya he was a looney. Although I guess that's more looney than I thought.” Rose shouted over the wind and through the walls.

“I still do not understand.” Susan said looking between myself and the direction of Rose's voice.

“Well, I guess it's pretty funny thinking back on it now. Since nothing happened. But I'm pretty sure he wanted Laven to-”

“THAT'S ENOUGH ROSE.” I raised my voice sternly

“Pharaoh, what is Rose talking abo-”

“You don't need to know Susan. Trust me. Rose, just get us across that bridge. I'm pretty sure this piece of paper is going to be worthless in a few minutes. We need to get over it faster than bad news travels.”

“I will not stand for this, I need, no. I demand to know,” Susan commanded.

“Only after you tell me why you haven't changed yet, Susan. From the sound of it earlier, I thought you hated wearing that.” I said pointing to the frilly black and white maid getup.

“Ah-” Susan's voice caught in her throat and her face turned red. “Y-you expect me to change in front of you? Absolutely not! Letcher!”

The cabin was small, and Susan, still dressed as a maid, flushed red, was trying to kick at me from the other side rocking it back and forth. She was usually calm, stoic, but I think I hit a nerve.

“Whoa- hey! Calm down. You'll rock the carriage! Susan, I'm sorry, just stop- ow!”

And the carriage wheeled off into the night. Down the hills, down the dirt path toward the city of Bietterheim and the Marru Bridge, the Wyrmbacks beyond; never to look back.

Chapter 36

Across the jagged and mighty peaks of the Wyrmbacks we hiked, the fields, forests and meadows of Vilmheim far behind us... More like below us. A distance that could have been walked in minutes before now took hours on these treacherous paths. Steep ravines and canyons gouged deep down into earth between towering peaks, like daggers reaching beyond the sky and hidden in the clouds. If it wasn't barren sharp rock, it was trees, trees everywhere. Except for occasional bird of prey circling overhead monitoring the meek rodents scurrying across the soil far below and that one gigantic herd of goat these mountains were completely deserted. Only the hardiest survived these uncultivated and untamed lands. I had difficulty believing there was actually civilization nearby.

Yet there was. In spite of all the warnings the traveling merchants threw at us, incessant about warning me of all the wild, ferocious beasts and monsters in these mountains. At least until they realized the company I kept, then they always walked away in a hurry. Still, they claimed the paths were far too treacherous. It had been years since they had been properly maintained, all because of some trouble had which has brewing in these mountains. The Principality of Domdracveria, Home of the Old Dragons was an ancient kingdom that had shielded itself within these mountains for well over a thousand years. There were rumors spreading about a schism in the royal family, a civil war that had brewing for almost two decades. Was that any reason not to keep the roads kept? Did they plan on going bankrupt from a complete breakdown in trade? Perhaps not. With mountains like these, being isolated and isolationist wasn't a problem.

If the killer peaks weren't enough, the weather would do well to keep people out. A sudden gale of wind brought me back to reality with a bone chilling sear. Even the spring sun shining high above did nothing. A clear sky meant nothing to the winds, height, the dizzying drop in air pressure. All of it keeping the snowline low and the glaciers fresh. I was no longer kept wondering how the Marru River had such a wicked current. All the water being fed down from up here all year long, it was inevitable.

Another gale, blowing back in the opposite direction scattered the bubble of heat I was relying on to prevent frostbite. Strolling unaware of all the cold, the salamander kept cheerfully humming away as she marched. Susan, practically no more dressed than Rose for this hike, also seemed unfazed. She doesn't even have a full pelt of fur, she's mostly skin; Rose too, who's supposed to be cold blooded. What

the hell is the deal? Why am I the only one freezing my ass off? I would get closer, but I'm not sure some parts of these paths could handle all the weight in one place. At least that was the excuse. Another jealousy fueled fight could send us all over the side.

“Hey! Hey look!” Rose shouted from point.

“Roes, don't yell.” I sighed. “If you cause an avalanche...”

“Another avalanche.” Susan sighed herself.

“You two act like we were on the side of the valley that got crushed.” Rose pouted.

“That is precisely why we are so concerned. It may occur anywhere unexpectedly.” Susan retorted.

“Oh, so I guess ya don't care there's a town ahead?” Rose said dismissively.

“No. Seriously?” I said shaking off the chills.

As I continued on, Rose and I peered around the bend in the path to see a quaint alpine village. Nestled in a not so jagged mountainous valley. A habitable plateau among the actual rock daggers. From the cottage chimneys billowed black smoke, a welcome sign. It wasn't from burning buildings, and thankfully it didn't look like a run down demon realm. Surrounding the village were picturesque farmer's fields and meadows populated by grazing sheep.

Snoozing beneath one tree, a young man and curled up beside him a woman wearing peculiar clothing. Like sheep- oh wait, that isn't clothing. Curled sheep horns sprung from her head, legs ending in hooves instead of feet and a gold fleece around her legs, arms, waist and chest. There seemed to be something like a pair of black spats for underwear, both pants and bra. It was definitely some sort of monster. I suppose for such a charming scene like this, the entire area must not be hostile to monsters. They both looked so blissful, and even though I was jealous at his content sleeping face and how warm and comfortable he looked wrapped in sheep skin I plodded on, maybe someone elsewhere could give directions.

It appeared I was correct, even walking among the old antiquated cottages the only strange look we got were the same one you would give toward run of the mill strangers. Better than that, the simple townsfolk gave their courteous smiles, a wave and a 'hello'. I

felt awkward waving back, since I'd never been greeted in this world with hospitality. Well, real hospitality. The kind of hospitality where you don't get lied to, drugged and tied up. It was a depressing thought that this was the exception relative to all my other experiences. My instincts told me that life shouldn't be that harsh. Even with my memory the shattered mess that it is.

I had only looked away for a few seconds before I found Rose already pouring silver coins from her pouch onto a vendor's table and hauling away what appears to be a large wheel of cheese bigger than her head. Her ravenous appetite pushing her onward as she took a huge bite out of it, almost more than her cheeks could handle and chewing away with a blissful look on her face. Noticing me watching her, she somehow managed to swallow that gargantuan mouthful before thrusting it in my direction.

“Did ya want some?”

Pushing it back toward her, I answered, “No. You go and knock yourself out.”

My appetite wasn't really in the mood for that much cheese all at once. Besides, she hadn't even taken the wax off it yet. I was about to tell her when Susan, whose attention had been elsewhere, pulled on the sleeve of my shirt.

“Pharaoh, now that the opportunity has presented itself, we must ascertain the most expedient path south.”

I let out a long sigh and wearily replied, “Yes. I know. We still have some hours of daylight left.”

Thankfully, no one seemed to be offended by our presence, baring a few glances and chortles about Rose's eating habits. An old lady with an oblique bend in her back happened to walk nearby, so I thought, 'hey, why not?' She was the motherly type, a special type of glow about her near toothless smile, wrinkled face and perpetually closed eyes. She seemed happier than ever just for someone to talk to.

“Excuse me, miss?” I asked, stepping toward her in case she was hard of hearing.

“Oh, hello there dearie.”
Dearie? People still say- never mind.

“We're traveling and heading south. Could you tell which way to-”

“Oh ho ho, I wouldn't travel that way.” She cheerfully laughed.

“Why would we not?” Susan asked.

“Oh? What a cute little girl you are.” The old lady was nearly sparkling now. “Do you want a treat?”

“Madam, please. Could you-”

“I got a little something left over from the butcher's.” The old lady said as she casually pulled out a hunk of soup bone.

“Hey!” Rose called out, her mouth half full of cheese. “Ask her to sit first.”

“Silence you unconquerable-” She went from calm to confused to irate in three seconds flat, but to her credit she braked fast. “I am not a dog.” She growled, storming off toward Rose.

While the two of them had an ambient and friendly shouting and taunting match off to the side I was left leaving the old lady hanging. Might as well figure out what she was talking about.

“Why wouldn't we take a road south, miss?”

“Bandits dearie. Been on the path for a couple winters now. Even the cold won't make em go. Getting to the capital ain't no easy stroll no more.”

“And we can't avoid the capital?”

“Oh, no no no. All roads lead to the capital. You didn't know?”

“No, I just said we were travelers-”

“Oh. Hello there.” She said, identical to her greeting not thirty seconds ago. “You look just like my husband did some forty winters ago.”

Well, I guess that means we've tapped this kindly senile old lady.

“Just wanted to say hello mam. You go home and enjoy

your soup."

"Oh yes. That's right. Soup for dinner tonight. I almost forgot. Thank you dearie. Bye bye." She glowed even when saying goodbye and continued down the road.

I turned around to see the other two still fighting, which was more like Susan berating and lecturing Rose while Rose chomped away at what was left of the wheel of cheese with a bored look on her face. About time I stepped in so we could get going.

"Okay. So if we just pick the road going south, we'll reach the capital. If we take the road south of there, we'll be good."

They both stopped in their tracks and Rose quickly shoved the last hunk of her improvised meal in her mouth and swallowed after fewer chews than I thought was healthy or safe.

"But," I emphasized." There seems to be a little bandit problem.

"Bandits!" Rose shouted with a gleam in her eyes.

"Uh, yeah. Bandits."

"Perfect. I love bandits. You can kick the stuffing out of as many as you want and no one gets mad. Except more bandits, but that's just the gift that keeps on giving!"

"Will you calm yourself," Susan berated. "On these treacherous paths, the bandits could easily ambush and hold most unfair and deadly advantages. This is not a game."

"They say the same thing too. 'Hand over your purse.' 'Don't try anything funny, miss.' 'What'cha doing all alone here miss? Lookin' for company? Ow, my spine. Please gods make it stop. Mommy.'" She rattled off in a mocking voice. "Those kinds of things."

I felt a little sympathy for all the bandits trying to make a dishonest living who had karma come back and bite them tenfold by running into Rose. I found it hard to believe I sympathized with bandits myself, but I did. But we don't have the time for a moving eulogy to the dear and long ago departed. We had to get moving.

Rose's boisterous steps put a little confidence in my own step, although not the same for Susan. Susan who claimed extensive knowledge of traps and the like. I could see her eyes darting back and

forth.

“Felled trees or stirred boulders for logs and stones to block the path ahead. Roll them down upon the path to create initial confusion and casualties. Javelins and arrows from a high vantage point above cover...”

She was quietly rambling to herself, covering the better half of valor while Rose marched forward humming to herself. She had even drawn her sword, flicking her thumb over the edge. I think she was sincerely hoping whoever was ahead would try something. For once I wish we wouldn't have to deal with that. After rounding another bend in the pass, I'd see how heavy a responsibility that wish was.

Rose came to a halt immediately and simply looked on with an uncharacteristic look of surprise on her face. When I walked past her and peered over her shoulder, I saw in the distance, far down the path, a mass of black smoke billowing up into the sky. When Susan joined us, her expression matched our own. Where the path was blocked, it fed into what looked like a large camp. Quite fancy at that. A wooden palisade, towers and built on a sizable plateau and gentle slope on the mountain. There wasn't any use standing around gawking, I took the first step forward, and the two girls followed.

The earth looked disturbed and relatively recently too. The sheer volume of footprints in the frozen earth and stone was shocking; it looked as if a stampede fled this place. A stampede of people. By the size of the footprints, I'd say they were all men. By the rusting weapons strewn about, I'd say they belonged to the bandits the old lady warned me of. The wind had never stopped blowing, but each foot print seemed to have been pressed then frozen into place. What caused the ground all around to heat up enough to thaw the winter permafrost? Some raging fire must have gutted this place, and that fire must have been quite intense.

The only way forward was though the camp itself, so we pushed on. The feeling of a ghost town not lost on any of us. Pretty much each and every building and tent had been scorched and burnt to the ground. Most of the defensive wall seems to have met the same fate, except for a few stubborn posts that told us there was a wall here at all. Some of the ruins were still smoldering. What manner of fire or fuel allowed it to keep burning... A few terrifying thoughts bounced around inside my head. This attack may not have happened so long ago. Normal logic doesn't always apply in this place. Something more sinister could be at work here. I wasn't the only one on edge, Susan

was as cautious as ever and even Rose, serious for once, was sensing a clear and present danger.

A sudden groan caused the three of us to jump up into the air together, Susan and Rose pointing their weapons toward a collapsed tent with something stirring underneath. Jamming her staff to act as lever under a thick panel of wood, Susan heaved it up far enough for Rose to slip her claws underneath and flip it over. Hidden underneath, a man looking like he had gone through hell. He was covered with soot, his hair and clothes burnt. He seemed to react to the sunlight, which his eyes were certainly not adjusted to. Although he was conscious enough to stir and look in our direction, he wasn't in much of a position to do much else. I brought my water skin to his lips, and he greedily grasped it with feeble hands and tried to empty it in one go. I had to violently pull it back as he started to cough from taking too much water too quickly.

“What happened here?” I asked nicely.

The man shook his head. Still mumbling and coughing. I think he was calling out someone's name. He kept repeating the word 'Gerald'. Maybe a friend of his?

“Hey! Punk!” Rose shouted. “He asked you nicely. What happened?”

It may have been too much for the man, he shook violently, but the surge of adrenaline caused his eyes to come into focus at last. He looked me over quickly, but when his eyes glanced at Susan his face twisted into fear. But that was nothing compared to when he looked at Rose; he screamed bloody murder and tried to crawl away from us. A quick thump of Susan's the staff against the ground caught him by the scruff of what clothing he had left, and he was brought to a halt. He switched from screaming hysterically to hyperventilating like some scared mouse.

“No. No! No fire. Back. Go away! No!” He yelled with a raspy burnt throat.

Whipping behind Rose was her tail, cresting with fire. So that's what his eyes were on. Something had traumatized him. It wasn't a stretch to say it was whatever burnt this place to the ground.

I needed to calm the man down, “Rose. Can you step back for a minute?”

She looked at me with a disappointed look on her face. One she wore even while she was still cracking her knuckles in delightful anticipation. Thankfully she complied so the man could calm down even just a little.

“What happened here?” I asked the man again.

I held my water skin just out of his reach, pulling it back every time he desperately tried to grasp it. After a few times, he quit and decided to start talking instead.

“A demon...” He mumbled. “Laughing. Laughing.”

He spoke with a peculiar dialect. I looked over at Susan who was also looking at me, nodding as if to confirm what I was thinking.

“No. It would appear he is not native to these mountains.”

“Wherever he's from, he's a long way from home.”

“Sounds South Breech Islander to me.” Rose called out behind us.

The man tried to sit up and see where her voice was coming from, but I decided to get his attention before he went back into a panic again.

“And what did this demon do?”

“Dropped outta the sky. Breathing fire. All out of nowhere. Everyone ran. Tried to run. Something fell on me. Passed out. No one helped when I cried out. Everyone's gone? Or are they all dead?”

“Yup. Lot of dead!” Rose shouted out.

Rose was just only twenty or so steps away poking at a charred body on the ground. A gruesome scene, I was surprised the smell hadn't hit me yet. I didn't have the time to wretch though; I had to grab the man by the cheeks and forced him to look back at me instead of where he heard Rose.

“And what were you doing here?”

“Huh? Who are you?” He asked.

“What were you doing here?” I repeated.

“You ain't one of the- I ain't telling you nothing!”

“He will not be required to,” Susan said calmly and matter-of-factly.

Her index digit pointed toward a torn and partially torn piece of fabric mixed with the charred ruins of the tent the man was trapped in. It looked dyed, something pretty rare, given the times we were in. It pulled it from the rubble and held it up to the sunlight. It appeared to be a symbol. A blue boar on an orange background by an old oak tree a vibrant green and brown.

“Looks noble.” I said.

“Mercenaries!” Rose shouted out, poking around elsewhere in the camp. “Someone's paying em to cause trouble!”

The man bit his lip and stayed quiet.

“Well, I guess if you want help, you might want to explain-”

“Nothing you can do to me that the boss can't do worse. You think I'm gonna talk? You've got another thing coming. When the boss hears you trespassing like this, he's gonna-”

“Then we can skip to my favorite part!” Rose shouted, suddenly standing over the prone man.

How she got over so fast, I don't know. The man got one good look at her, and his face contorted in terror until it contorted from the force of Rose's reptilian foot crunching in the poor man's teeth. Out like a light, a few rotten teeth scattered across the cold ground.

“Nothing like a little justice on a bandit.” Rose said, standing tall over the helpless and now seriously injured bandit, hands on her hips, very proud of herself.

“Rose...” Susan simmered. “Can you not just for once restrain yourself...”

“Nah. No use. He's small fry. You can tell by the way they talk. The second they start trying to use who they work for to scare people, you know you got a nobody. They probably told him nothin'.”

“Well.” I said, checking the man's wrist for a pulse. “I don't really feel like waiting around here. And I sure don't feel like carrying him...”

Rose clicked her tongue, “Fine.”

Slapping her tail on the ground, she lit a pile of rubble on fire near the man's twisted unconscious body. How spent charcoal like that can burn. I... No. I'm not gonna think about it.

“When that goes out. He's on his own.”

“Right. Either way. Someone, or something, has cleared the way for us. Maybe we can get to the capital without any other interruptions.”

Packing up our things, Susan and Rose scouted out the rest of the ruined camp toward the exit. I stopped for a moment as I felt a series of pin pricks on the back of my neck. I looked behind me, around me and finally up. Circling overhead were the same birds of prey. For all the wanton destruction and death though, I wondered what happened to all the carrion birds... Was something scaring them off? No. Let's just keep going. Before I start imaging weird things. Like I'm being watched.

I could always distract myself with pleasant thoughts, like maybe for once we could stay somewhere for a bit and get some rest without someone trying to kill us. It was a sign of how out of control my life was that maybe the first time I would be able to relax would be at the center of a nation about to break down into civil war. I didn't see much room to argue with Rose. Someone could very well be paying people to cause trouble. To what end though? I didn't see how else bandits, even so far out in the boonies like this, would be capable of building such a sophisticated camp like fortress right along one of the main roads? There are a lot of other things I'd rather think about than that. I'd rather think about a nice chair, a warm fire and to take these accursed boots off before they meld with my feet.

Chapter 37

Five days, five days on the hell march over these damn mountain trails, but at last we were gifted with the panoramic view of the Domdracverian capital, Ifern. Cresting the final mountainous path was a grueling and punishing affair (at least to me), but finally the capital was spread out before us. Verdant green glowed from the winding three rivers that trisected the city, forming traversable canals. Ancient and sturdy walls surround the inner city and in the midst of it all, a steep hill with a castle built from a series of terraces stretching high up and looming above the city. The architecture was all very Gothic/Germanic, a real alpine almost familiar like culture to be sure, as it was nestled securely in a river valley with colossal peaks surrounding it on all sides.

A favorable wind blew through the peaks surrounding this city. Almost as if this place was a blessed strip of land. Either way, this is the city the three of us must pass through in order to continue south toward the coast. After our grueling march without so much as a hovel since that quaint little village, I think we were (at least I was) entitled to get off my feet for a day or two. I didn't care about the rumors of a looming civil war. Alright, I did. That's why we're not staying for a week. Too long in one place and these girls might start getting... ideas. The best part of our arrival is the fact that it was a downhill hike from here on, the thought of that being the most exhilarating feeling I've had all week.

A leisurely stroll down the beaten and leveled paths leading toward the city were like a dream, and the chill winds no match for the direct sunlight from high above. By the time we got to the gates of the city, the sun was still hanging just above the peaks to the west. Now we had reached the gates, but I was not quite certain I had thought everything through. Sure, the people were kind back at the village, amiable toward my two companions, but what about in the city? Were we going to have another incident? It seems trouble always follows every time we take a step inside any civilized place. Now I was dreading the inevitable. Anything that happens twice is doomed to happen again.

As I stewed in my apprehension, we had approached the north gate of the city well before I was mentally prepared. There wasn't even a line of people seeking entry into the city. To save us a little trouble, I had the two girls cloak themselves so that we might not attract too much attention from anyone we kept our distance from. It wasn't going to be just a stroll into the city, of course the guardsman standing watch

held up his hand to stop us.

“Affiliation and business?” He asked.

I looked right and left at the girls, neither said a thing so I sighed and answered, “No affiliation and travel.”

I couldn't see it, but I could feel the guard raise an eyebrow. Had I said anything weird.

“No affiliation? Where are you from?”

“We've traveled here from the north.” I answered bluntly.

I thought where we had come from would be pretty obvious.

“This road has had bandit problems for more than a year. How is it you passed through?”

“There isn't a bandit problem anymore. Their camp is all but gone.”

“Burnt to a crisp!” Rose shouted out.

“You're serious?” The guard asked skeptically.

“Yeah. Great news huh? Can we go now?” I said, starting to get impatient.

“Hold on,” He commanded, lowering his spear to bar our path. “You two,” he said pointing at Rose and Susan. “Not without proper identification.”

Without skipping a beat Rose and Susan both produced two small pieces of paper. Rose had her usual smug look on her face and she presented hers, but when she noticed Susan's paw handing over a similar document, it turned into a puzzled frown.

“Guild members?” The guard almost blown away. “Two of them at that?”

He paused for a minute while switching between the two of them, reading them over again and again.

“Right. Can't say they aren't in order. You three can pass. I would request you take any information you have about the unrest on the road to sheriff.”

Giving him a nod, the three of us passed under the fortified gate and into the city proper. It was unlike Vilmheim where people roamed through the streets and bustled from inside the buildings. There also wasn't another monster in sight. However, an occasional glance in our direction was all about the attention the people of Ifern could afford. Two ladies with the occasional swish of the tail, or glimpse of inhuman feet from underneath the hem of their cloak was about all there was to garner attention. Thankfully these people were either adequately tolerant, or sufficiently afraid enough to not bother us. I was fine with both at this point really. I just wanted to find an inn and sit down.

"Hold on a second," Rose demanded. "How did you?-"

"Gain entry so easily?" Susan interrupted smugly. "While your own guild documents were being renewed, Matilda presented me with this." She said holding up the letter like document. "She claimed it would allow me to enter anywhere your own guild documents would allow."

Unlike Vilmheim, the streets seemed very barren in comparison. The stalls and marketplaces barren and eerily lifeless. If a blockade of outlaws was barring travel to and from the city, I suppose it would make sense. Nothing to sell and by association no one looking to buy. With so few people milling about, navigating the streets was actually pretty easy and hassle-free. The fact that there were few people around also lessened the pressure of all the stares directed in our direction. I suppose monsters wandering in the city wasn't exactly that common here. There was still an eerie calm for what should be bustling city life and that seemed all about what Susan needed to break that silence.

"Although I must inquire: What does a wink, a nudge from the elbow and being wished 'good luck' meant to represent? When she handed me this document she performed all three in succession. I have meditated over it a number of times before now, but I am still unable to determine-"

"Nothing!" Rose shouted.

"I was not asking-"

"Nothing at all!" Rose yelled stomping her foot.

"Oh ho?" Susan chuckled. "How suspicious and very unlike-"

I saw a twitch under Susan's hood and immediately after she

pulled back her hood to reveal her ears. I was going to reach out and stop her, but the look on her face told me there was something else to worry about other than the stares of the city folk with eyes on her jackal ears. She held up a paw when Rose and I were about to step in at the same time to shush us both. She turned her head left and right, her ears twitching all the while.

“Hooves,” She said at last. “Many pairs of hooves.”

Rose straightened out her back and I saw her head tilt toward the southeast. She stood very still and then finally nodded at Susan. It wasn't for another six or so seconds when I finally heard the clatter of horse shoes on cobblestone and a pack of eight men on horseback round the corner a good eighty meters ahead of us and come barreling down the center of the street. The three of us stepped out of the way, but when the lead rider's eyes turned in our direction he pulled back on the reigns and came to a stop, the other riders following suit before us.

'Great. Just great,' I thought to myself.

The front man was covering his face with a hood and his body with a cloak, not that any did much to cover his massive bulk, all of probably muscle underneath. How the other seven behind him dressed and carried themselves, I wouldn't doubt they were soldiers. Why is it every time I expect trouble it happens? Can't I be wrong for once? Can't I just pretend it won’t happen and it won’t for once?

“Rosette the Thorn Knight?” The man asked, his voice deep and rumbling.

Rose looked at me and I at her. I could only shrug and nod my head in his direction. 'May as well come clean,' I spoke in body language. I don't think we could really say we were disguised very well in the first place. Rose nodded and removed her hood.

“Yeah. That's me.”

The broad shouldered man threw on leg over the saddle and slid down onto the ground. Taking a few steps toward Rose. I stiffened my back, tensing up like a bow. I could feel Rose and Susan doing the same beside me until the man suddenly went down on one knee.

“Captain?” Several of the riders behind him cried out is dismay.

“Rosette. I Knight Captain Rissler of the Royal Guard

humbly request your assistance. I am here on behalf of the crown who are willing to compensate you for your services in these dire times."

Everyone but Rissler, who was still kneeling, were reeling back in surprise. I think a lot of people were on a need to know basis.

"Huh? A job?" Rose said, the corner of her mouth turning upward nervously. "Well. I am on vacation... Something like that..."

"We're just passing through," I said, jumping in to help her out. "We don't really-"

"Please then..." Rissler said, getting back to his feet.

To show the sincerity in his eyes, Rissler removed his hood. Grey hair cropped in a very traditional military style. His hair had long since grayed, but he showed barely a wrinkle of age on a lightly scared faced. For a middle-aged man, his bulging muscles must wind his actual age back ten or fifteen years even if was just over fifty. Like his hair, his eyes were a very light blue, almost silver. Behind those eyes were... a very real feeling of desperation.

"I am merely here to retrieve Rosette. Details are to be discussed at the castle. If you choose not to, then at least allow us to offer you chambers for your stay while you consider."

I looked back at Rose and then over to Susan. I studied Rissler's face again for a few moments, his eyes were still fixated on Rose, even if Rose was looking mostly in my direction as she divided hers between Rissler and myself. Were they expecting me to say something? A jingle of chains to my left yanked my attention toward Susan, who had planted her staff on the cobblestone and was focusing her own attention on Rissler and the men assembled behind him.

Susan leaned over and whispered into my ear, "I feel his words are true and honorable. I detect no trace of deceit."

Susan's intuitions are pretty spot on. Given the choice between another inn in the city... After what happened last time... And the room service in a royal palace... I'd have to say the palace is sounding like a better deal. Especially if it's free and all inclusive.

"I don't see why we shouldn't hear you out." I reluctantly agreed.

"And who might you be?" Rissler asked, finally acknowledging my existence.

“Hey!” Rose shouted out. “What do you mean by, 'and who might you be?”

The angry inflection in Rose's voice didn't seem to be lost on Rissler and his men.

“I apologize. I had heard rumors that the Thorn Knight was on the move southward again. But about those traveling with her...”

“That's my husband your being dismissive of.” Rose glowered.

Back onto one knee he goes.

“Please accept my sincerest apologies.” Rissler begged.

A Knight Captain of the royal guard bending a knee not once but twice? Rose had told me some wild stories of her exploits, but it seems the further south we go, the more extreme people's reactions to her are. There IS a looming threat of civil war in this country after all... Just how desperate are they to have the Thorn Knight on their side? Maybe I couldn't blame them for going all out. Maybe I've only seen previews of what Rose is truly capable of.

The riders behind him were mumbling to themselves, “Husband? Doesn't that mean?...”

“Laven.” Rose declared, puffing out her chest. “You best remember that because only I get to call him that... And the third wheel over there,” she so offhandedly mumbled whilst twirling her wrist in Susan's direction.

“Why you...” Susan snarled.

“I am afraid we only prepared one horse. Our informants were only able to tell us to expect the Thorn Knight soon and we only had a few minutes warning after you had arrived in Ifern.” Rissler nervously explained as he waved his hand toward a spare horse in tow.

Rose's mood seemed to have improved remarkably over a very short period and she immediately bounded toward the horse and deftly hooked one claw in the stirrup and threw herself atop the saddle. The poor horse felt something was wrong, but all Rose had to do was pull hard on the reigns and lean over toward the horse's ear and say something under her breath. Even a trained animal like that can be

spooked, but to see such a large animal be so deathly still and afraid is another sight altogether. She then extended her outstretched arm toward me, imploring me to join her. I only got one foot in the saddle before Rose grabbed hold of me and helped pull me up, if only to seat me in front of her as she slid back to give me the entire saddle. I think she did it just so that she could wrap her arms around me.

Silently Susan had followed and while she did struggle, she managed to plop herself in front of me, her legs hanging off the side of the horse and her paws holding on to the back of my neck. Rose let out an 'ack' of disgust.

“I am not inconveniencing you? Am I Pharaoh?”

“N-no, not at all.” I stammered.

Sandwiched between Rose behind me and Susan holding on to me in front of me. Rose's arms wrapped around my waist and Susan around my neck. Susan very purposely flicker her head and hair in my direction, sending a strong womanly scent in my direction and being unable to move away I had to sit and endure it.

“Hey. Stop that. No cheating.” Rose yelled.

“I haven't the slightest inclination what you are referring to. Please continue to ignore, 'the third wheel.” Susan snidely retorted.

“Why you...” Rose snarled.

“Can it,” I said, trying to regain my composure.

Could these two not go five minutes without fighting after all this time. Not to mention how unashamedly they fought like school girls while this nation's elite forces looked on with puzzled expressions. Yes, the supposed answer to your prayers are doing something so very childish and immature right in front of you. Are you feeling more confident yet? I certainly hope you are.

Luckily the ride to the castle was less eventful, a quick gallop as time seemed to very a scarce and precious resource around here. The whirlwind pace ever since arriving in Ifern made that all but clear. Blowing past every checkpoint and guard station was a nice perk though. Going off on our own and having to go through the same thing back at the main gate would have gotten tiring. It was still late afternoon, but if we had to repeat it another two or three times it would be night.

We were speedily extradited from the city of Ifern and up one of the keeps looming over the city. In every direction soldiers marched in tight formations, castle servants scampering in every direction like chickens with their heads chopped off all of it adding to a general hysteria that the world was coming to an end. A sideshow of a man, a salamander and an Anubis riding triple back on one particularly haggard looking horse wasn't even on anyone's radar. That or anything Rissler is doing is on a need to know basis and to give him a wide birth to do anything he wants. That was fine by me, I had a feeling there was going to be trouble enough as it is.

A VIP treatment, escorted by the elite of the elite palace guards and their captain to a waiting chamber, adorned with what could make a museum, all pieces of art and decorum that scream to anyone who walks past or lays eyes on just how ancient this entire kingdom is. If there was a running theme, I'd say it had to do with dragons. From the banners and flags flowing in the wind atop every spire of a dragon to the gold and marble statues, it was everywhere. The gaudy display of wealth, opulence and importance definitely didn't stop when we finally arrived and waiting in a private room were a collection of three foppishly dressed and round older men. Politicians. That is what their appearance screamed to me. Seated behind them was a woman, more of a girl, silent, forlorn sitting passively on a chair on the far side of the room. Attending to her were two handmaidens, their head bowed as though they were unworthy of matching gazes with anyone present.

“Finally.” One of the old men sighed.

The one with the biggest and tallest hat out the three waddled his way over to the three of us. Our escape blocked by Rissler standing at the doorway with his troops, he was probably there for security detail, but I felt it was the former instead.

“We were beginning to worry we would have run out of time.”

“Maybe you can explain what is going on? Everything feels like a whirlwind right about now.” I desperately asked.

The stink eye I got was fierce. I don't think these important looking men were used to direct and pointed questions... If they were used to answering questions at all. It was also a bad move on their part, one more step in that direction and Rose is going to get upset

again.

“Laven, Minister Heggs. A...associate of-”

“Husband of.” Rose interrupted, so haughty with her claws on her waist. “I'm on our honeymoon, you better got a good reason for interrupting it.”

Neither I nor Susan were upset, our jaws had dropped at the pure audacity Rose had just displayed. The two minsters behind the one named Heggs mirrored our own and they looked about ready to explode with demands we be dragged away and thrown in the dungeon, but Hegg's expression hadn't changed at all. His wrinkled aging face was stiff as ever and his sunken brown eyes didn't even quiver.

“We are fully prepared to compensate you in exchange for your services, Thorn Knight.” He calmly continued. “As you no doubt have heard in your travels, our Kingdom is being threatened by civil war. We hope to avoid that today when Prince Deron arrives at court.”

“A contemptible young man.” One of the other two minsters added. “No respect for the legality of the crown.”

I had to wave my hands and get them to slow down, “Hold on now, I don't have the slightest idea what's going on. Can you not slow it down?”

“I'm afraid we have no time, Mr. Laven.” Heggs said. “Prince Deron is the first and only son of our dearly departed King and Queen whom passed away fifteen years ago. The king to illness and the queen to complications during labor. Giving birth to Princess Violetta, the true heir to the throne of Domdracveria.”

Like a showman he drew his arm back and pulled our attention to the girl seated quietly on the far wall of the room. Should I be bowing? Neither Rose or Susan were, so my knees remained frozen solid while my mind was still caught in second gear when the apparent speed limit of these series of events was over eighty.

“Prince Deron is a charismatic man, a man who thinks the throne of Domdracveria should be his.”

“Why shouldn't it?” I innocently asked.

Apparently the wrong type of question. I think my question was tantamount to treason. Since I was standing right next to the currently

ornery one woman mercenary corp I was going to get away with it.

“Violetta was born with the royal seal, Deron was not,” Hegg calmly explained, holding back his anger.

I noticed there was a particularly large ring on her right ring finger. It was silver with a pure green and perfectly transparent emerald that must be at least seven carats if not more. The emerald secured around an ornate silver dragon coiled around it and holding it in place on the silver ring. Once again, the prevalence of dragon imagery was not lost one me. Hold on though... did he say, 'born with'?

“Born with it?” I asked skeptically.

“Domdracveria has a long history, Mr. Laven. The mountains that the dragons once called their home over a thousand years ago. The men who lived among them, our ancestors, made a covenant with them thousands of years before that. From the tribes long ago that lived in these mountains, the one that were deemed worthy by them, every monarch to be was born with a ring on their finger. A magic ring that grows with the wearer and disappears upon their death. Deron was born without, not unheard of over the past thousand years since Dragons vanished from Domdracveria, but Violetta was born with a ring, so she must be Queen, no matter Deron's temper tantrum continues.”

Great, now I was trying to be roped into matters of royal succession. I don't have time for this.

“We fear Deron may bring to bear half the kingdom on itself to seize the throne for himself. If not, we fear he may be so vile to take Princess Violetta's life.”

“So you want bodyguards?” Rose asked, disinterest heavy in her voice.

The failure to spark Rose's interest was starting to cause Hegg to sweat a little. I think these guys were scared and desperate.

“We're prepared to compensate.” The third and silent minister said.

He produced a small chest, no bigger than a lunchbox. When he opened it though, it was brilliant and shone so bright I had to look away. All manner of precious gems were almost bursting from the small wooden box. I couldn't even begin to know just how much wealth

was packed into that tiny space.

"Boring~" Rose moaned. "You think you can just buy time away from my Laven?"

Now the three men were panicking. And hold on, weren't you just excited to be coming here about twenty minutes ago? I wasn't expecting the most stellar attention span from you Rose, but this is getting a little bit- No. Never mind. I think they were pretty sure as well that would do the trick. Now that their trump card had turned into a punchline, they were scrambling. Princess Violetta behind them and her two maids still hadn't budged. Were they just- just at that moment I looked at Violetta our eyes met. It was so unexpected and after a little jump in her seat she immediately looked away. Well groomed and kept, but she seemed just like any girl to me. Simple brown hair and pale green eyes, even her features were humble, plain to put it politely as I could. Her skittishness and silence made me think she was more mouse than monarch. I think I was starting to understand how things had gotten as bad as they are. Deron might just be a power hungry megalomaniac these minsters were making him out to be, but he probably thought he was a better ruler by an order of magnitude. I wasn't in any position to argue after what I've seen.

While my attention had been absent, the three minsters had been busy imploring and slowly heaping on the number of zeros on the cheque they were trying to write to Rose in exchange for her services. Susan had been silent and ignored this whole time, her eyes scanning and studying each and every person present. When our eyes met, her face seemed tired, bored and disinterested. I concurred. She darted her eyes to Hegg, then back to me. I nodded and she stepped forward.

"We apologize, Minster Hegg, but we are not interested in becoming involved. We have our own business to attend to."

"The silent third companion." Hegg chided. "Our business is with the Thorn Knight, not with-"

"The High Priestess of Anubis, Shoshanah." She said raising her voice and artificially squaring her shoulders to make her seem taller and more imposing. "Our time is precious and your compensation inadequate. Our journey is one for knowledge and your trinkets are insufficient to obtain it."

Susan had a certain pressure to her, the aura that surrounds her and an uncanny ability to make it heavy. Heggs and the ministers

definitely felt it and their rude dismissive tone with her was gone in an instant.

“You're after knowledge?” Hegg floundered. “The royal archives would be your best bet. If you require access to them, for your services, we'll arrange it to be so.”

“The archives!?” The other two gasped.

“Desperate times.” Hegg spat out, cleared his throat and smoothed out his clothes. “Very well then. The royal archives. All the knowledge within it you may read at your will. You cannot remove anything, but you can study it all you want. Over a thousand years of records and tomes on all manner of subjects contained within... We do not bequeath this honor often to outsiders. A handful every decade.”

Well, I think that's still a little- and it seems Susan's eyes have glazed over. I think she may be seeing something full of stars by the expression on her face. Maybe she was even salivating a little?

Susan?” I said reaching out tentatively to shake her shoulder and bring her back down to earth.

“Laven!” She suddenly cried out uncharacteristically excited.

I looked past her to see the back of her cloak swaying back and forth as her tail was wagging almost out of control.

“This is precisely what we require!... Ahem.” She coughed, reigning in her excitement and going back to her usual calm and stoic self. “We may uncover a hidden clue or answer to the many questions we desire answered.”

She sounded calm, but her tail was still wagging behind her. Are you just pulling my leg for your own purposes, Susan?

“A bunch of books? Really Hannah? Really?” Rose mocked while making a scrunched and skeptical expression.

“While I hopefully uncover secrets still yet revolving around Laven, you may run amok and do...whatever it is you do.”

Rose looked to me and I replied with a simple shrug. 'Why not?' I'm willing to put aside my own grievances and skepticism and trust Susan on this one.

After a few seconds of thought, Rose finally blurted out her

demands, “I can do what I want on the training ground and no one tells me what to do. Oh! And free access to the kitchens and storehouse.”

The three ministers looked at each other with faces of sheer unadulterated confusion and befuddlement. Until they each started smiling, nodding and gave their collective, “Agreed.”

“And~!” Rose said with emphasis, then went silent until her face twisted with malicious intimidation, “If anything happens to my husband...”

“You're free to do as you will,” The minister reeled. “Just keep the Princess safe until we can be assured she is safe.”

“Until the time which we have learned all we can, or exhausted all venues of research.” Susan added.

The ministers agreed without hesitation. If it was a library, that could take quite some time. I'm sure it seemed like a good deal to them for a contract length. Weeks? Months? Years? Last time I remember, Susan couldn't even read modern scripts of this world... No. I'm sure she knows what she's doing. For now, we can just-

“Minister Hegg!” A voice cried from beyond the door.

Rissler and his men intercepted a panicked looking soldier, lightly garbed and uniformed, like a scout or a runner. In his clenched hands, a scroll of paper. Hegg nodded and he was escorted in.

“Minster Hegg, sir! News from the north. The highway blocked by bandits had vanished!”

Wow. Good news really does travel slower than bad news. Even we made it to the castle before the message was passed on to the most powerful men in all the land. At least I thought that should be good news.

“Burnt to the ground, sir!” The messenger screamed.

“No. That can't-” Hegg fumbled with his words, his eyes wide with fright.

“No. We walked freely through a burnt out bandit camp on our way here.” I assured Hegg myself.

Except it wasn't assurance of good news I was giving him. He

seemed only more distressed when I confirmed the news he was hearing. Why? I hadn't the slightest, but when his eyes turned toward Rose and her signature burning tail swishing behind her... Oh no.

“Wait, we didn't-”

“Damn that girl...” He growled.

His eyes weren't on Rose though, he was cursing someone else.

“She knows full well every one of them is supposed to be on stand down. Why can't she... Rissler!” Hegg bellowed.”

“Your honor!” Rissler stepped forward and saluted.

“Find her at once. Rein her in. Stop her! She'll ruin everything.”

“Yes sir.”

“Maybe sentimentality clouds your judgment, captain? I said find and stop her... You know full well what it means if Deron discovers even one of them have failed to stand down.”

“Sir, yes sir!” Rissler sounded off like he had a pair.

With a click of his boots as he turned a hundred and eighty degrees on his heels, he marched out of the room with his royal guard in tow. Fretting together were the ministers, brooding over and absorbing this new information. The three of us stood by confused and lost while the Princess sat idly by, still without a peep or even stirring. Before I could say anything else, or even asked to be dismissed to our room, another messenger out of breath ran into the room.

“Your... Honor... Deron's host... We've spotted it approaching on the south highway!”

I didn't have to fully understand what was going on to know that things were quickly going to hell.

Chapter 38

The courtyard was alive with the sound of marching boots, the clatter of steel boots cascading across the castle grounds as a host of heavily armored soldiers strode forward in perfect formation and unison. It was an almost eerie sight, the unfaltering perfect of each movement of every limb. Watching from high above in from the chamber provided to us for our stay, I watched what could have passed for the final take of a propaganda film of some fascist state's military parade. Only one thing was glaringly different and it was only superficial at that, each soldier marching to the tune of the drummers were completely encased in archaic medieval armor. That wouldn't usually be enough to concern me, but when I say encased, I do mean encased. I couldn't even see the faces or anything that told me these were even human beings. Such were the dogs of war, but perhaps this host of Deron was all for show.

Deron had arrived earlier than expected, the servants of the castle still clamoring and panicking in every direction. I'm sure the captain and his superiors would as well, these tin cans, at least a hundred of them in one large column, were inside the castle grounds now. The ministers were panicking that he might be so audacious to set off a coup. Normally I think you wouldn't let someone with an army that large waltz right into your home base, but as Prince, Deron has special privileges. No one seemed eager to agitate him either, I think this whole affair was to somehow placate and appease the man I now see riding so high and mighty behind his toy soldiers.

Dressed in armor befitting of a royal, an almost golden bronze sheen and a vine like vibrant blue pattern twisting over every plate... How much money does decoration like that cost? Anyways, he has pretty generic brown hair, green eyes, the nose and the cheekbones to go along with it. The gaudy dress up was pretty blatant compensating. I don't think anyone would dare think that let alone say it. He certainly did look like the princess' brother alright. There wasn't much room to argue over that. Just by the audacity to hold his helmet and plume under his arm while he grins and waves to the people milling about the castle grounds as though he was a returning conquering hero.

“Never fought a real fight before.” Rose offhandedly declared.

Seated on the window sill with one leg dangling over and her back against the frame, Rose watched from another window as the troops marched below.

“Why do you say that?” I asked, just to keep the conversation going if anything.

“No one smiles like that. Not unless you're a big phony.”

Anecdotal at best, plain dismissive and antagonistic at worst. I think she was in a rather sour mood in general. I don't think she was sold on this whole arrangement, but Susan and I see this is a chance that maybe we could stop wandering around aimlessly and find some clue to understand how and why I'm here. There has to be some kind of hint locked away in the cavernous library such an old city would have stowed away. I'm sure playing bodyguard and doing everything in our power to prevent a crisis might be a little too much for you, but you need to bear with it for now.

“Our attendance in the throne room will be required before long.” Susan announced near the entrance to the chamber. “We should not be tardy. For once I agree with Rose. He gives off the aura of being stately, but there is something contrary underneath.”

Stepping away from the window I took a deep breath and readied myself and the two girls garbed themselves in cloaks for a disguise. We'd rather not be the center attention when this shit storm rolls into town. Rissler had suggested it earlier and I presume monsters in the throne room would be quite the faux pas. Luckily our presence wasn't even a rumor in the castle yet, they were all still panicking behind the brave face of those welcoming Prince Deron. No one had the time to pay attention to us. One errant footstep, one misplaced dish or glass and I'm sure that person would be receiving the strictest of punishments.

When we finally managed to navigate through the corridors and masses of scrambling servants buzzing within the castle and made it into the main keep the Prince was already taking his last few overly dramatic strides toward the throne. A very impressive and elaborate throne room, ancient and decorated in dyed fabrics and rugs far beyond the reach of common folk. The ceiling was needlessly high, at least twenty meters and all across it fresh fresco murals of dragonkin and man throughout what I guess is the history of this kingdom stretching back more than a thousand years. The throne itself sat at the end of this football sized room and up two series of steps, a total of about forty so it might tower over those speaking below. Seated on that throne now was the ever quiet Princess Violetta and surrounding her a wall of ministers, Hegg front and center with another eleven of

them. It was as if they were a shield to protect her because she looked so fragile up there.

Marching in single file and lining themselves along the right wall of the chamber were a choice selection of twenty five of those tin soldiers he had come to the capital with. And along the wall they stood silent and motionless, in a stare-off with Rissler's Royal Guards, with the man himself standing front and center. Watching from the balconies overhead the powerful movers and shakers, the influential noble families with their various banners had gathered. Each of them watching over the drama unfold below them. Hidden away on the floor, off to the right of the throne and obscured by the shadows Rose, Susan and I watched and waited. If something happened, we'd have to make it to the top of those stairs in a heartbeat. A bunch of old men blocking the way to the princess probably wouldn't stop Deron and some of his men for long.

“Dear sister,” Deron bellowed, his voice low and forced to give it power as it reverberated off the walls. “It has been too long since we last had a chance to meet.”

He didn't even bow or show any display of humility. It was something the minsters ahead and the nobles up above noticed, but no one dared say a thing.

“I see you are still unmarried. I suppose the wise ministers have not found a suitable man to be king?”

“Princess Violetta is only just of age Prince Deron. Cease with your thinly veiled mockery of the court.” Hegg retorted.

So, there was someone with backbone here? He seemed to also be choosing his battles if he allowed himself to be offended now and not before.

“Of course. I am just concerned for the princess. I would not want an uncouth and unworthy brute of a man to sit upon the vacant throne beside her. Since I ever so dearly care for my kingdom... and my dear sister.”

Now his attention swept to the nobles gathered in the balconies up above, addressing them all with a sweep of his hand.

“Of course the regency was not passed to me, but to the gentleman assembled around the throne, but I find the effectiveness of their rule has been found wanting. Taxes rise and the treasury

dwindles. Crops fail yet the people of the capital still feast. Lawlessness and unrest runs rampant. I do not know how my dear sister and her loyal attendants plan to keep Domdracveria safe."

"No army has ever successfully invaded Domdracveria, Deron. Not even the hordes of the demon lord a thousand years ago." Hegg spat.

"Because of King Rudright the Great, Minister Hegg... A role model for every Dracverian boy. A strong king, something Domdracveria has believed in for thousands of years. The strongest rule to tame these wild and ferocious lands."

"That is enough Deron." Hegg growled. "You were not summoned to Ifern to lecture. We have come to negotiate."

"An offer, to me?" Deron said mockingly.

Hegg looked over and made eye contact with one of the other minsters and giving him a nod was presented with a rolled up scroll. The old man made his way down the steps and Deron made his way up until they both met on the middle landing between the two sets. With little ceremony Hegg handed over the scroll to Deron who accepted it quickly, unfurled, glanced over and began rolling it back up just as quickly.

"You did not put me at great risk to march all the way north to Ifern for this, did you?" Deron snarled.

Hegg was sweating, but he didn't speak a word.

"Dual Monarchy? Kingdom of Domdrac-Verdantia? You think I want to be king of a weakened Domdracveria? That you can cut it in half and present it to me as some sort of compromise?"

Deron dropped the scroll onto the stairs and let it tumble and roll down like a Slinky. The nobles all around gasped in shock and awe.

"This kingdom truly is under terrible governance. Would not those present agree?"

From the audience about half of those gathered nodded and gave their ayes of approval, which were in turn quickly met with the boos of the other half. A seed of disorder and chaos which had been planted was beginning to sprout.

Deron leaned forward onto Hegg with a particularly poisonous looking grin “The princess and all her helpers cannot even handle a simple brigand problem.”

“One easily handled if you would untie the hands of the princess, Deron!” Rissler's voice shouted out from the line of royal guards.

Stepping forward and presenting himself, the old man singled himself out, standing tall and stoic, his head turned toward Deron. Deron's expression turned into displeasure. His perfect tempo and rhythm thrown off by the interruption.

Hegg yelled out commandingly, “Captain Rissler, stand down-”

Deron held out his hand to silence him, “No. Let him speak. I won’t deny my old teacher to speak his mind. I owe him at least that much respect.”

“The Dragoons could settle the issue in a week. They merely need orders to ride.” Rissler shouted out.

“Do you not care for the laws of the land, captain Rissler?”

The way he said 'captain'... It sounded like a loaded and pointed word at the expense of Rissler.

“The dragoons are forbidden from riding for all but external requests and call to arms from the Empire. Turning them on the people within Domdracveria is a sin that cannot be forgiven. Such as the covenant with the dragons of old commanded. Surely you, of all people, would not forget this?”

I could not see Rissler's face from this far away, but I think I could hear him grinding his teeth. There wasn't anything he could to say, so I turned toward Susan who was watching with rapt attention everything which had been said. She looked to me and nodded.

“It is as the prince says. These 'Dragoons' are forbidden to ride in what I would postulate as domestic disputes. If the dragoons were to be levied by a larger empire... Having them killing each other when fighting for different houses would be... Problematic."

Susan's innate knowledge on the law of the land verified it. Something tells me this wasn't a law that is always strictly followed.

Maybe broken when the spirit of the law is not compromised. Thinking back, Rose had said that one man we found still alive in the ruins of that camp was certainly not local. Would the law include protecting him? When I turned to ask Rose about it, her eyes were glazed over and she looked about ready to fall asleep. I guess I can't blame her, but it was poor work ethic to sleep on the job. When I was about to shake her awake the raised voiced of Rissler and Deron pulled me back.

“The mountain paths and the forts built upon them, they are too narrow for armies to deploy and besiege. Dozens... No. Hundreds of men would lose their lives. The cold winds making short work out of any army attempting to clear out those caves and forts filled to the brim with brigands,” Rissler ranted. “How is it you managed to make it north past the blockade?”

“Bandits and highwaymen are cowards. They only seek to risk aggravating the weak. When my escort marched north, the camp there scattered and fled before my arrival. They would not dare block my way. Although I understand your cowardice. What could become of the kingdom if many men were lost just trying to pull up the roots of a few bandits and rebels? A certain 'outside' force could easily overwhelm the north? Is that what you are worried about”

“Deron, you...” Rissler growled.

It was plain as day that Rissler wanted to say something, but it was something so outrageous he didn't have the gall to do so. Actually, it is unfair for me to think of it like that. It is more like Rissler is smart and in control enough not to do so.

“Just one more reason my dear sister should step aside. I would handle the problem far quicker and legally. The people of Domdracveria would be free to travel in their own kingdom again. The blockades will end, the goods will flow!... Except.... It seems from last I heard that the road south from the north is open...”

This can't be good. Heggs, Rissler and the other ministers froze on the spot. I think I know what is coming.

“An entire camp, burned to the ground. Only one assailant was spotted. Not something any man could do. No. That's something only a dragoon could do. I must say I am very disappointed. That such an order would be issued in spite of the sacred laws of the covenant.”

Rissler took another step out of line and menaced, “Deron...”

He was stopped in his tracks when the line of Deron's soldiers all shifted in perfect unison, the clatter of their steel plates as they stood down from full attention and readying to lunge. Each of them tense like a bow and ready to fire.

“Even if it wasn't ordered. You are responsible for the actions of every dragoon. Are you not. Rissler? Oh. My apologies That was quite some time ago, wasn't it? You are captain of the royal guard now. Isn't that right, Commander? Retirement was never really an option after the injury though, was it? I'm sure the wife was understanding. I'm sure your children were upset.”

Again, with the pointed and weighted words and Rissler looked about ready to explode from provocation.

“These new events in mind-”

Here comes the blow. The ministers were all sweating up a storm. There was panic in their eyes. There wasn't anything they could do to stop what was about to happen now. I wasn't sure about all the details, but this sounded like a challenge of non-confidence if I ever heard one. Rissler was frozen in place, he dared not move any further and instigate a conflict. Heads would roll in the ensuing chaos, I'm sure the Princess' would the highest priority. It would hang on his pride and honor forever. The nobles all around looked on and watched, holding their breathes. The princess, the same as- wait. My gaze matched with her own. She wasn't watching her brother rant, rave and play to the crowd in his grand play. She was looking at me. Her eyes were pleading. There was no way those eyes were saying anything other than...

“I do believe as Duke-”

Help me.

“-I must declare...”

Damn it.

I stepped forward out of the shadow, “I'm afraid you are mistaken, Prince Deron.” I shouted out over the man.

The room went absolutely silent and all the energy and attention floating in the room turned on me in an instant. It was almost enough to push me back into the shadowy corner, but instead I took another step and then another into the light as I climbed the stairs

toward Deron. The guards seemed ready to pounce, but Deron waved them down, allowing me to approach.

“And who might you be?” He asked dismissively.

“The name is Laven,” I said. “I'm also the one that took care of the bandit problem.”

As I approached Deron did not relent in his dismissive appraisal of me. Dressed in my meager armor, the brown leather jerkin, the gauntlets, steel toed boots and the blue jeans (my only splash of color)... I was out of place among the gaudy and flashy dressed nobles with their luxurious dyed clothing.

Deron laughed, “You? Excuse me for not believing you. If this is a joke, I suggest you speak the punchline before I become cross and have you punished for insolence,” He said jokingly

“No. It's no joke. They were a rude bunch, so a few days ago, when I was passing through to reach Ifern, I had to deal with the lot of them.”

“You?” Deron laughed, still in good spirits for now. “You and what army?”

“No army necessary. Just we three,” I said as I waved my hand over Rose and Susan standing down below.

I couldn't quite make out the expressions on their faces, I knew that Rose was certainly awake now, but as for Susan...

“A dragoon, a single wyvern and an unexpected surprise attack at night... but three? Besides, the camp was burnt to the ground and most of its inhabitants cut down and burnt before they could flee. I said don't forget your punch-”

Susan finally let her voice bellow, “Such a task is simple for one under Laven's retinue. Neither will your pointed and disrespectful tongue be tolerated any further.”

Shifting under her cloak and climbing the stairs with her golden staff in hand, clanging against each step Susan moved to my side.

Deron was not appreciating the new tone he was being talked down to with, “Who do you think you are to talk to-”

“I ask the same of you Prince! You speak to King in Exile,

Laven. Lord of what you call, The Barren Wastes."

The court went into an uproar. I wasn't sure what Susan was up to now, but it was too late to contradict or interrupt her now. She'd have to explain this later. The minsters and Hegg looked surprised more than anyone. Deron was shocked for a moment, but thinking over it for a few seconds a skeptical expression returned to his face.

"King in Exile? Barren Wastes? Forgive me for my skepticism... Who are you to declare such a thing with a straight face? Some kind of Magi?"

Susan didn't say a thing or even moved for a moment. Then she slid her paws from out under her sleeves and removed the hood over her head. The sight caused another fresh round of gasps from every corner of the room.

With her opulent jewelry, jackal ears and inhuman paws for all to see, she declared, "In a manner of speaking, yes."

The reaction from Deron was far more pronounced than anyone else and surprising to say the least. He was so calm, cool and charismatic before. Now he was backing down, almost terrified.

I stepped forward as he retreated, with Susan following three steps behind and declared some fabricated revelations of my own, "There was no 'wyvern' responsible for what happened to those bandits. The fire and mayhem that took place, all of that rests on one woman..." I whipped my hand back and pointed toward Rose who was still standing dumbfounded. "That would be The Thorn Knight."

Rose looked right and left. As if I could have been mentioning some other Thorn Knight in the same room. She then looked at me and pointed at herself as if to silently ask, 'Who? Me?'

Yes you. Play along Rose. For the love of god, just get it and play along.

"Thorn Knight?" Deron said, stopping in his tracks at last. "That's preposterous."

"Hey! My name is Rose, not 'Preposterous'!" She shouted out in quick retort.

Spurned and insulted she at last climbed the stairs to my side and faced off with Deron. At my side, she pulled the hood off her head

and glared at Deron with fierce judgmental eyes. Another round of gasps, another clamor of voices from up high among the nobles.

"Where do you get off thinking you can just call people names like that?" Rose said angrily. "You're supposed to be a Prince. You think you can just go around insulting girls like that and get away with it?"

Rose, I don't know what is going through your head or what you heard and I think I will just ignore it for now. Nevertheless, thank you.

'It wasn't the dragoons?'

'The Thorn Knight has returned from the north?'

'I've heard stories. I wouldn't put it past her...'

The voices of all the nobles had taken a complete one-eighty turn. Rose was playing along, somehow, for some reason. Susan was bolstering my credibility and I stared Deron down, unafraid of him when probably should be.

“Monster mercenaries dear Sister?” Deron spat toward Violetta and her minsters. “Has our family fallen so low? Did you not think this kind of affront would-”

“We're guests under the Princess' hospitality. Not mercenaries. We have not been paid nor did we seek it,” I said,

Which was technically true. How about that?

“We don't want trouble during our stay. If all this was about some law being broken, now you know it hasn't. Was there anything else?”

Deron bit down on his lip and his eyes were so filled of hate and all of it directed at me.

“I'll remember this, Laven, King of Nothing. This isn't over.”

With no ceremony, no flair, or even a proper farewell Deron descended the stairs and made his way toward the exit to the court. Behind him all his tin soldiers formed up single file and followed him out.

I would later learn that he gathered all his troops and left Ifern immediately right then and there. Right now though, I felt the weight of

the entire room on me. I was beginning to wonder if I had done the right thing.

Chapter 39

A pop of a cork and the fizz of fresh wine erupts and fills the room, rebounding off the walls the hearty laughter of an old man. Secured far inside and away in the castle's lower east tower, Rissler and I had been toasting, drinking and feasting together for at least six hours now. At least I hope it's only that long. It just doesn't stop.

“I still can't believe what you pulled!” Rissler roared. “I have never seen that piggy squeal like that before in all my years.

Another bout of hearty laughter and he fills my half empty glass once again. Banging his fist on the table he summons a servant boy hiding behind the door and orders more food and wine. I wish he wouldn't. I just really wanted to go to bed. After the clamor and chaos back at court, I managed to sneak away for just two measly hours before Rissler found me and dragged me here. Our own little private celebration for Deron's sound diplomatic defeat. I wasn't sure if they actually believe the three of us took out that bandit camp or not. Maybe that's just what they wanted to believe, so they were going to and screw the evidence to the contrary. If that's the official story, then Deron apparently has no leg to stand on when it comes to deposing Princess Violetta. At least legally. For now.

“You do know that I only bought you time?” I said.

“Time is a precious thing my boy. You can't always buy it with all the money in the world. Making it is a fine achievement.” Rissler said glowingly.

“You also do know it was a bunch of bull-”

Rissler raised his hand suddenly, to stop me from saying anything more. He kept it hanging in the air, right in front of my face while he finished pounding down another full glass of wine down his throat.

“Everyone's heard rumors and tales of the infamous and vicious Thorn Knight. No one would bat an eye thinking that walking inferno could reduce the whole camp to cinders. Dead of night. A surprise attack.”

“With well over a hundred armed men.”

“Not that you'd fight em all at once. Lot of em would run too. If I only cared about money, I probably would too. Not that many men

around that can go toe to toe against a monster. Especially not a monster among monsters... No offense mind you."

None taken, really. After the first time, I've always been in the eye of that firestorm. I guess I've gotten used to it. What he said a little earlier was nagging at me though.

"I hardly thought 'piggy' was a way to refer to a member of the royal family. I guess you only call him that off the record?"

"Old story." Rissler said as he reclined in his chair as though remembering it took effort. "Deron was once in line to be king until his sister was born with a royal seal on her finger. After that, he was so worked up about learning how to ride a wyvern. All members of the royal family have for centuries. He probably thought if he could show he was worthy through merit, they'd give it back. Anyways, he was only about five and he picked the biggest and the finest of them all, but she was a little too much for the little prince. She was just a child too, mind you, but she had a lot of energy and didn't know how to hold back. He didn't care though. If he could get her to obey, then he must have thought he'd prove he would be the better ruler. That girl got a little too rough when playing and left a real big gash on his chest. His fault really. When you thrash around scared like that. Other than it bleeding a lot, it wasn't gonna kill him, but he squealed like a stuck pig. Everything went downhill from there. He was terrified of wyverns after that. Never grew out of it."

"And the wyvern?" I asked.

"Became the Princesses' wyvern. She may be a girl, but she's gonna be queen and customs say she's gotta learn to ride one. Although she's a little too frail and sick to do so. They turned out more like sisters. A big sis to look out for her."

So, Deron is scared of wyverns. The principle mount of the elite dragoons of this country. The way his eyes looked terrified when looking at Rose and Susan, I'd say it goes further than that.

"And you'd usually just have the dragoons solve your bandit problem?"

"People would look the other way, yeah. At least that's how it would have worked a few decades ago when I was a young lad myself."

"So, you're a dragoon as well?"

I could see the pain in his eyes when I asked that. I almost felt compelled to apologize, but he began to tell his story anyways.

“Yeah. Was. For a good twenty-two years.”

He turned over his arm and pulled back his sleeve to reveal a hideous looking scar running up the inside of his right arm.

“Slashed tendon in my good arm. Never got better. Couldn't hold a lance anymore. Couldn't hold onto the reigns either. I got good enough with my left, after months of trying... But I wasn't gonna be flying into the thick of battle ever again.”

“And the wife?” I pressed on.

“Devastated. We had our times though. Retiring for the both of us wasn't the end of all things.”

Wait. Hold on.

“Both retire?”

“Did I say something weird? All dragoons are married to their wyvern.”

As I thought but wished I had heard wrong. This is going to get awkward.

“We had time to have a family then. Did I tell you about my daughters yet? Twins. Gretchen and Helga? Cutest little things ever. Just learning to fly now too!”

I really should stop being surprised about these things now. I'm not sure about those names and 'cute' going well together. However...

“Marry your mount?” I said skeptically.

“These aren't horses, boy. They might be monsters, but their dragonkin. They go by different rules.”

“I'm having a hard time imaging it, Rissler.”

“A Wyvern is just a dragon with wings for arms instead coming out of their shoulder blades.”

“Now I'm having a hard time imaging a knight piggyback

riding on someone flying through the air."

"I said a wyvern are dragonkin. Different rules. Sure they're monsters, but they don't listen to the demon lord. Never have. During the great war a thousand years ago, the dragoons of Domdracveria rode with the Empire against the Demon Lord's hordes. We battled his monstrosities and demons in the skies for air superiority. The dragons and their cousins don't bend a knee to the king of monsters. Never have. Even when they changed forms a couple centuries ago, they still don't. They can even return to their old forms for a while. That's when you can ride together. The magics of the new demon lord may be something fierce and wild wyverns may be quite frisky instead of hungry, but the dragonkin are not thralls."

"Except you ride them?" I asked once again with blatant skepticism.

"Guess you don't know about the covenant." Rissler sighed, sitting straight again as he poured himself another glass of wine. "Long long time ago, when the people living here, my ancestors, built nothing more than mud huts, they made a deal with the dragonkin in these mountains. They got tired of killing each other. The dragons live long and a tough beyond comprehension, but they breed slow. Humans were the opposite. So they decided to get along instead. Humans mine gold and make wealth that the dragons adore. The dragons protect the mountains and the tribes living there. The dragons told the wyverns, who serve the dragons, to help the humans when they prove themselves worthy. So, if a human can win a fight with a wyvern, it becomes that human's servant. If that human loses, the wyvern gets a meal. They used to think if they ate the clever humans, they'd gain their intelligence. Eat enough humans and you could be a match for a dragon."

"So you wrestled with your wife and won?"

"Oh no. Hardly anyone wrestles wild wyverns anymore. Not many of em left in these mountains anyhow. If any at all. No, my wife and I knew one another since we were but wee children. Making a bond that close, for so long, that's another way to do it. Safer too. Lose less knights that way. Takes a lot of trust to let a man on your back and a lot of trust that she won't shake you off from up high when her temper fires up."

As fascinating as all this was, I felt like my eyelids were getting heavier and heavier as the night went on. I was going on about two

hours of nap time in the last twenty-four hours and I was starting to feel that way.

“So. Tell me.” Rissler said biting into a fresh apple. “You really a king?”

I was wondering when this question was going to come up. I was prepared for it and hoped it would come up eventually. It was rather awkward to being up.

“No. At least I'm pretty sure I'm not. I've lost a lot of my memory, so I can't say for sure. Susan seems to think that and she's been following me around for a couple weeks now.”

“Susan?”

“The Anubis. The wolf girl. Don't call her that though. Her name is actually Shoshanah. That's the name Rose kept calling her. It just sort of stuck and became habit.”

Rissler looked at me with a puzzled expression on his face. I don't blame him.

“Anyways, I hardly remember much from when I woke up in the woods about a month ago. I'm pretty sure from what I do know I'm no king, but if I have to pretend to be to get things done, then so be it.”

“Ha!” Rissler laughed. “Don't blame you at all.”

After all, they do say that if someone asks if you are a god, you should always say, 'yes'.

“You certainly showed Deron up. Given the choice, a guy like you would make a better king than that pig. Not that I would. I serve my lady after all.” He quickly scrambled to recover.

“Anyway, I'm just looking for a way to get my memories back. It isn't coming back on its own and I'm sure something magical took me from my home and dumped me in the middle of the woods. I want to find how and why.”

“Which is why you want into the library?”

I shrugged. “Yeah. That's pretty much it.”

“Well, let me just tell you one piece of advice. Always served me well- Oh damn. Gods, is it that early already?” Rissler shouted as

he looked over my shoulder.

I looked behind me and through the curtains pulled over the window a faint orange light was shining through. Oh you've got to be fucking kidding me... It's morning already? I was a little tipsy, maybe on the verge of being hungover a little but the entire night had come and gone?

“I gotta get back and report to my post before my men get there. Real pleasure, Mr. Laven. We'll have to talk like this again.”

Like a whirlwind the old man moved faster than I thought possible and was dressed and slamming the door behind him before I could get a word in edgewise. I pinched the bridge of my nose and rubbed my tear ducts trying to wipe away the bags that were no doubt under my eyes as I stood up myself and carried myself back to my room. After Deron had left, it seems the castle quieted down enough that I didn't get in anyone's way as I stumbled through the hallways. There was hardly another soul to point me in the right direction of my room though. Not that directions would help. I'd probably have to sling onto someone and just follow them back.

I don't know how much time passed, but eventually I did come to a familiar hallway after what felt like another lonely hour wandering the castle halls to the keep my room was in. When I pushed the door out of the way and found our stuff strewn across the room, I found no one waiting for me. I heaved a massive sigh of relief. My sleep schedule may be completely screwed, but at least I might get a proper length of undisturbed sleep on an actual bed for once. When I reached the bed, I collapsed immediately and sunk into the straw mattress and fresh smelling sheets and it was almost enough for me to clock out immediately.

Almost... A beam of early morning sunlight was shining into my eyes. That accursed sun was rising and the room was on the east side of the keep. I turned over, but the light was flooding the entire room now. There weren’t enough curtains and certainly no shutters that could block out all that light. Who designed this room? I might have to kill him. After about ten minutes I discovered that I was still so worked up that I couldn't drift off to sleep no matter what I did. After another ten minutes, I was laying down on the bed, wide awake. I felt the bags under my eyes, but I couldn't keep them shut.

As long as I was up I might as well keep walking. Even if I don't make it back to my room when I start slowing down maybe I'd drop on the spot and curl up for a nice nap. Kicking off the bed and back to

wandering the barren castle walls where most everyone was still sleeping I explored the insides of the castle keeps and even watched the sun rise for a little while. I wandered until I eventually heard the sound of wood clacking against wood along with thumps and painful groans. As I got closer I heard a string of profanities from a single person, like a drill instructor. When I rounded another corner I discovered a courtyard, except instead of gardens it was nothing but dirt and equipment. A place populated by a bunch of soldiers and in the center of a ring was a familiar face. It was Rose rolling her shoulders and cracking her joints.

Standing up high on a short watch tower looking over the training field was a grizzled and scarred man shouting his orders and supervising the soldiers. Each and every one of the soldiers caught in a strange limbo, on one hand desperate to leave, but not enough to. Holding his fingers to his lips the drill instructor let out a shrill whistle, pointed to a random soldier and pointed at Rose. When he didn't jump to it right away, the soldiers beside him shoved him forward into the ring and toward the grinning Rose. Throwing sanity to the wind, he raised his wooden sword above his head, charged in and tried to bring it down on Rose's head. The predictable attack allowed her to just step out of the way as the wooden sword swung down and opened his side up to take a quick chop to the side. I could almost swear I heard something crack other than the wood on the armor and the guy fall down to the ground, clutching his side.

Rose didn't seem phased at all and a pair of attendants picked the soldier off the ground and ferried him to the wall where about seven other soldiers were already nursing their wounds. There wasn't much to it, but I think Rose wasn't interested in the individual fights. Maybe how many and how quickly she can send to the dirt? Rose wasn't given a breather and neither did the soldiers. Another whistle and this time the soldier slowly and deliberately approached, sword held out to protect him as he circled around Rose. Was he looking for an opening or just waiting for Rose to attack? It didn't matter, because if it was the second, he was getting what he wanted after only a few seconds. Like lightning Rose was inside his guard and the man didn't have the time or the experience to react fast enough for a thrust under his guard and into to his gut. Rose had him clutching his stomach and on the ground in an instant.

When the ninth victim was being carried off, the circle opened long enough and in my direction for Rose to catch a glimpse of me. Our eyes met and she excitedly waved her hand at me like a child. I had to turn my head away and cover it with a hand in embarrassment

as every other soldier turned around to look as well. When I looked back Rose was shouting something and pointing at two soldiers in the circle. Pointing at them, then at herself. The soldiers looked at each other and then at the instructor, who nodded for them to go ahead. The two soldiers tossed down their wooden swords and drew their real ones. Now Rose was flashing her signature grin.

With real swords in hand, they both charged Rose from the front at once. With only a wooden sword, Rose was at a handicap, but that probably wouldn't help those two much. Sidestepping one and parrying the other in one movement she pushed one sword away and with a free fist she clotheslined one and sweep the legs out from the other. One went flipping over forward and the other backwards, the end result was the same though, both were on the ground and not at all softly. After they had gone down Rose looked in my direction and waved at me again. Then she pointed at four soldiers this time.

While she was busy dispatching the four of them two soldiers with white bandages wrapped around them hobbled their way to where I was standing near the exit to the field. They weren't wearing very welcoming expressions.

“You Laven?” One asked.

“Yeah, that'd be me,” I replied.

“Look. Can you... Well...” He fumbled, not sure what words he wanted to use.

“Can you leave.” Said the other frankly.

The first went into a small panic at the bluntness of his friend and even more so when I turned to look at him instead of his friend to hear what this was all about.

“Well, she's been like this for about an hour now. Sergeant said we'd get special training today. No one thought it would be this.”

“She's killing us!” Protested the other.

“We'll have to do it for another two mornings if we try to leave. Look. She's gotten twice as bad since you showed up. Can you just... Go away for a while?”

“Please, for the love of the gods.” pleaded his friend.

When I looked back at Rose she was already through three of

the soldiers and savoring the last as she circled around him, eagerly anticipating what the cornered rat with eyes wide with fright and pumped full of adrenaline could manage to do.

“Whatever.” I said as I turned around and left the field.

With the puppy eyed look and the shear unnecessary terror and trauma I was causing, it would be better for Rose to enjoy herself without her feeling it necessary to show off to me. I could hear the sighs of relief from the two soldiers as I walked away. No point in having these guys be pissed at me. I'd go tire myself out somewhere else. Aside from watching all the fighting, I suppose there is another place that could help lull me to sleep.

Through the winding hallways I went on my new quest to find the library. If there was anywhere that could do it, it was there. I could also check up on how Susan was doing. Her being there is a guarantee you could stake your life on. I found nowhere in the spires that could hold something as large as a library, so instead I went downward into the hill the castle was built upon. I kept to the fancy and elaborate hallways and staircases, otherwise I might end up in a dungeon or something. After what felt like another twenty minutes of wandering I came to a pair of oaken doors dwarfed by a large stone wall. If it was going to be anywhere, this would have to be it. Steeling myself I pushed through and was instantly met with the smell of dusty and moldy paper.

Towers of bookshelves and shelves carved into the stone walls stretched to my left and right, up high for about three stories and a good hundred meters. On each shelf were books, tomes, scrolls and their ilk as far as I could see. Beyond hundreds, there were thousands of them here. I can say now that it was no lie that hundreds and hundreds of years worth of knowledge was being kept safe here. There was one thing older though. That was what was most likely hiding behind a mountain of books and scrolls piled on a desk front and center near the entrance to the library.

Behind a mountain of knowledge, built like a fortress around her, was Susan. I could tell by her ears sticking out of the top of her head and jutting out just above the tower of leather bound and roller paper scrolls. She deftly flipped the pages aside with her index claw and her red eyes darted left to right over and over again in quick succession. With her left paw, glowing with a faint magic light in her index claw she was writing something on scraps of spare parchment. I didn't figure she was left-handed. The more you know...

She was so absorbed in her reading and writing that her ears didn't twitch and sense my presence until I had circumnavigated her fortress and was standing behind her and looking over her shoulder. I half expected her to jump, but she merely turned and greeted me with barely noticeable smile. I suppose she was in her element.

“Good morning, Pharaoh.” She said warmly.

“Looks like you're making progress.” I replied.

“I endured great difficulty for the first number of hours,” She sighed waving a paw over one tower of books. “Until I managed to locate records in Old Fairrivian.”

I don't have the slightest clue what that is.

“Old Ferrivian is related to Old Tregul. Which was not identified as old before my tenure at my Pharaoh's tomb. Using it as I guide, I can use my own knowledge and translate it through the various writing forms and transcribe from those all manner of contemporary written texts located here.”

As she spoke she flipped through a complicated but no doubt meticulously organized set of books opened at the edge of the open part of her desk, the one where near the edges was occupied with towers of books. The symbols in each were all Greek to me. I could do nothing but be impressed. Sitting in front of me was a living Rosetta Stone. How does she manage it? How many RPMs is that inside her brain? I figured from her manner of speech and mannerisms she was smarter than the average wolf, but this is ridiculous. In the twelve or so hours since I last saw her, she had already created a crude system to translate everything in this library after a few thousand years of absence.

“Why is it that there are so many written languages but everyone speaks the same one?' I mused.

“Excellent question, my liege. I was too puzzled, so I looked into it. Apparently some one-thousand and five-hundred years ago there was a great calamity consuming the world. The Demon Lord Xrilix was leading a massive host of monsters across the world committing genocide on mankind. Many of the continents of this world were overrun and the people of the world fled to the last bastion of humanity. The Empire, the dregs and left overs of it scattered across this very continent.”

“So everyone who hadn't been killed off came here? And if they were all here for a few hundred years, they'd all adopt the host language at some point.”

“Precisely,” She said with a tinge of applause in her tone. “Much knowledge was lost, only fickle and few tatters of knowledge beyond these lands were saved and made their way here. Undoubtedly, dozens of languages were lost in that time.”

“How does that explain why you and I can talk to each other? I can't imagine that desert kingdom speaking the same language on coincidence.”

“A small treatise on demonic energy answers that very same question I have dwelled on too. Many monsters before the ascension of the new demon lord had no means of human speech. Apparently within the transformation was also the power of speech. That speech being easy enough as there is only one dominant spoken language left the world over. Convenient for trade, therefore also necessary for monsters to communicate with humans.”

“An odd thing to do considering what the monsters were initially transformed to do. Would that really be needed?”

“I will not pretend to understand the mind of the new demon lord. However, I am glad either way.”

She turned around again and we stared into one another's eyes for a few seconds before we both looked away at the same time.

“I-I still have much work to do, Laven.” Susan stuttered. “Should you desire, I can prepare more space and room so that we may-”

“No no no.” I said waving my hands. “You keep doing what you're doing. I'll just... Look around and check up on you later.”

Her ears curled up a bit and I noticed her tail had come to halt and she sighed, “Very well. If that is what you wish. I will continue to comb these books for knowledge so that your mysteries come closer to being solved.”

With renewed vigor, she went back to translating the mountain of books around her. Just looking at the lines scribbled in one was enough to give me a headache. Not to mention make me feel inadequate. This girl was a machine. I thought I was just a little smarter than average, but that's hard to believe when seeing this girl at work.

There was nothing for me to do here other than distract her, so when she had fully buried herself back into her books I slipped out of the library.

I let out a long sigh on the other side of the door and made my way back up toward the spires of the castle. It seems there wasn't much that I could do and even after the little display not much I was going to be trusted with. Maybe I would die of boredom before I managed to even fall asleep. My head was spinning with thoughts, doubts and a tinge of self-loathing. There wasn't a damn thing for me to do. I had hoped for a breather, but it seems the only time I'm ever of any use is a lucky hair brained and off the cuff caper at the right place at the right time. How many of those did I have up my sleeve until my luck ran out? I wasn't having any luck now. My head was so full of thoughts it was giving me some fierce insomnia. I had better nights rest on the road... There's a frightening thought. Had I already grown accustomed to it? Was this calm something alien to me now?

My head was so full of thoughts that I didn't notice the person I ran into when I came around another corner. It was still so early and there had hardly been another soul wandering these halls I don't think I could have been blamed. There was a short and high pitched yelp of surprise, but what was unexpected was that both she and I were knocked onto our rears in the collision. After nursing the pain in my tailbone, I looked up to see the brown haired, green eyed girl in the ridiculously fancy and luxurious dress of- oh shit- I just bumped into the princess. Is this the type of thing they threw people into the stocks for?

“Princess! Princess slow down! Mind your health and where you're going- Ack!” A voice of another girl yelled and then croaked in surprise as it came around the corner and saw the two of us on the ground. “Are you alright, milady?”

It was the same maid who was standing beside her when we first got here and met with the ministers. It was now the first time I managed to get a good look at her face. A face very consoling and motherly to the princess and toward me like a mother bear to someone between her and her cub. It didn't really suit her black and white maid uniform, but she did fit the bear look, she was short stubby and chubby enough to look like a bear.

“Wait for me!” Another yelled out and rounded the corner. She stopped at the princess' side out of breath, but when she saw me she put on the same face as the other. This girl looked similar to the other, maybe they were sisters? She looked the same, but she was

also the opposite. She was as short, but she was unhealthily thin and slender under the baggy maid uniform.

“No.” The princess finally spoke. “I was running it is my fault. My apologies- eek!”

Why is everyone either so angry or scared to see me today?

“Speak of the devil and he shall appear,” said the fat maid.

“Excuse me?” I asked perplexed.

I was definitely out of loop on something important.

“Oh, Mr. Laven.” The skinny one said in a complete about face in tone and expression. “We were just talking about you. Would you like to join milady for-mmmph~”

I think she was about to invite me to tea, until the fat one threw herself at her and covered her mouth. While the two of them were having some heated debate in whispers among themselves I got back to my feet and offered my hand to help the princess up. She hesitantly took my hand and rose back to her feet. I found myself looking into her eyes which were at eye level. That was unexpected. In these medieval times, the average height was a little on the low side. That said, this frail girl being as tall as me is unexpected considering how small she looks. I don't think her meekness and her propensity to draw herself in and try to make herself as small as possible helps.

“I-if you would. Mr. Laven,” She said almost too quiet to hear. “I wanted to thank you for yesterday.”

The two maids fighting amongst themselves stopped fighting immediately with their jaws dropped.

“If you would... Would you join me for tea?”

“Caffeinated?” I asked.

“Huh?” She said tilting her head to the side in confusion.

“Good enough. I'd be a pleasure. I wasn't busy anyways.”

The girl put on a warm smile. The two maids seemed quite pissed. Maybe a man around her age in the same room with her was a scandal? Maybe I just looked the rough unsuitable type? Could be my familiar and informal speech. Either way, anything to keep my mind off

that last train of thought was welcome. When I looked back, that same smile was gone though and she was looking past me, over my shoulder. Even the two maids were looking in the same direction. I was dreading it, but I couldn't crane my neck to look.

Standing at the end of the hallway, about twenty meters away, was a brown cloaked figure from head to toe. The hem of the cloak was long enough it dragged across the floor and the hood was pulled over his head and the face was darkened by the way the sun from the windows failed to illuminate it. I could still feel the eyes from that darkness scan the four of us, from the two maids and hovering over Violetta for a while and then finally onto me. When he finally saw me, that is when there was a change in his stance. The slow and procedural turn of his head came to a sudden startled stop.

Deron apparently has no leg to stand on when it comes to deposing Princess Violetta. At least legally.

For now. We fear he may be so vile to take Princess Violetta's life.

Aw shit.

“You two,” I said commanding the two maids. “Get Violetta out of here! Run and find the guards!”

Before I could get a, 'yes sir!' I turned back to see the cloaked figure already turning around bolting. I wasn't about to let him get away so I gave chase and ignored the yells behind me as I sped forward and drifted around the corner to see the cloaked figure still in a run. Security was too lax in this place. I know this high up in the spires it would be impossible for anyone to just drop in, but that doesn't mean a very resourceful and tenacious assassin wouldn't try climbing it. For now, he was running, which means his being discovered is worse than failing, that much told me that capturing him was well worth the risk. At the very least I could herd him in the opposite direction that the princess and her servants were going.

This guy was fast, no matter how much strain I put into my legs and lungs as I sprinted after him, I wasn't closing the distance. It took all I had to make sure I didn't lose him by taking the wrong turn down one of the castle's many intersecting hallways. I was angrier that I hadn't even come across another guard yet. Someone to help me pursue this guy. Regardless, I followed his winding, twisting and turning escape route. Not once did he come to a dead end either. This guy knew what he was doing. Maybe he was an insider, if that's so,

then what he has to say later would be a windfall for the general safety of the castle.

Every so often I saw the hood twist and look over his shoulder to see me still in hot pursuit. Unable to lose me, I guess he finally decided to make a last ditch escape effort. He was heading toward one of the large balconies that jut out from high up the spires. I don't know what he was thinking, maybe some extreme leap of faith? Maybe he lacked a cyanide tooth? He quickly leaped down the steps of a staircase and the open doors to the landing were at the bottom. I wasn't going to catch up unless I did something extreme as well.

When I reached the stairs, I sat my butt down on the railing and let gravity do the work. It was faster than bounding or running down the stairs and I was quickly gaining on the cloaked fugitive. When he turned around to gauge where I was, the startled flinch told me I had him. He had reached the bottom of the stairs, the exit was just a few steps ahead, but as fast as gravity would take me I flung off the railing and into a tackle. I wrapped my arms around his legs and he still in mid run fell forward and onto the floor. He wasn't even able to break his fall with his hands. His fall was stopped by the loud thud as his face smacked against the rug laid over the stone.

I felt as though I had a solid grasp on one of his legs. He wasn't going anywhere, or so I thought until I heard something crunch. It wasn't me, it wasn't him, it was something scratching and digging into the stone. They weren't arms emerging the cloak. A pair of long claws pushed aside the cloak and scrapped grooves into stone as they went. The figure then lifted itself off the ground on those talons and back onto its feet. I kept a firm grip, but the powerful leg merely pulled me along the ground with it. First I was pulled along like all this guy had was a limp, but then as he picked up the pace it was easy for him to take a few bounds with me in tow. Over the edge of the balcony and into the air he leapt and I had a hard time following what was happening as I experienced a few seconds of free fall. Was I being carried along into this madman's suicide for price of failure?

With a flutter that sounded like leather being beaten by the wind, a pair of green scaly and leathery wings hatched to those talons unfolded from the cloak and caught the wind as we dove and turned our free-fall turned into a glide. Over the castle walls and above the city we soared and all I could do was hold onto this leg with all my might. The wings beat and buffeted me with a torrent of wind that lifted the two of us further into the air and then the wings folded back again as we fell into a dive. She dove straight down into the city and between

the houses and then rose back up. All the while I was dangling helplessly still a good ten meters above the ground and the two of us accelerating our way at about a hundred kilometers per hour. It was then I noticed where we were heading, where I was heading. The marketplace below was empty, thankfully, but at the end of the street, above the house in front of us was a large conspicuous chimney. If we kept flying at this speed and rising up like this... I was gonna slam into it.

It was coming up fast, maybe another five seconds or so. I was certain death was absolute if I hit that at this speed. If I let go my death was probably just as likely. With the wind rushing past us, I doubt if I started screaming anyone would hear me, let alone the one flying. As the chimney approached I only had one chance. I put all my strength into my arms and make a gamble, so I pulled as hard as I could. Pulling myself up hard enough with all my strength I then let go and wrapped my arms around the flier's waist. As the chimney approached I flung myself upward and pulled down. When I did so, the entire body of the one I was hitchhiking on was pulled down and took the brunt of the chimney in my stead. With a loud bang and a slam, the stones exploded and scattered in all directions. That didn't stop the ride though. It didn't even seem to affect the flight path one bit.

In retaliation, there was another series of wing beats and our direction changed, this time straight up. I was still hanging on for dear life, but I was weakening, my muscles starting to ache. My grip slipped and in a scrambled I grabbed onto anything. Luckily, I managed to grab hold of the cloak itself, but hearing it rip a bit did not instill me with confidence. I didn't even get a chance to look up, I was too mesmerized looking down at the city below that was getting smaller and smaller. I think we were climbing just a little faster than about twenty meters per second. After a while, the biting cold of the wind and the height was taking its toll on me more than anything. My hands were straining to hold onto the cloak, but I soon lost the grip in my left hand. I could my knuckles of my right hand going numb as well.

Now I was looking down on Ifern below. About a good two kilometers high in the air. The castle looked so small down below. As my heart was racing, my teeth were chattering and my body going numb. I struggled against the g-forces hammering against my body to look upwards. There I saw exactly what the thinking part of my brain had long suspected, quietly in the corner. The cloak was wrapped around the neck and chest, but it was mostly a rope holding me up instead of clothing and that revealed what was underneath. A humongous pair of green scaly wings instead of arms that were

flapping and creating incredible lift. Human only half way up the triceps and the leathery wing attached to her armpit and slightly below. A long green reptilian tail acting as a rudder as it swishes back and forth keeping the path straight up stable. Dangling from the hips were two long legs, below the knees becoming covered in plate like green scales ending in powerful taloned claws. It was the amount of fair white skin that was showing that tipped me off and flipped a switch inside my head above all things though. A two piece that was more underwear than anything. Highlighted and decorated by scales and what looked like old shed claws. This was a monster. My powers of disbelief couldn't keep up anymore. I had to face the music.

It was then that she finally turned to look at me. Adorning the head were a pair of curved green horns, patterned like scales and a pair of fin like ears, like Rose's but green. Effeminately cut Shoulder length cut hair fluttering in the wind that was a dull pastel pink. It was then that a pair of gold colored eyes turned and focused on me. They shot wide open in surprise. The contours of her face twisting along in bewilderment. She spun around in midair and faced me as I hung below her on the last few threads of the cloak still hanging from her. My eyes traveled down in a morbid search to where the cloak was no doubt fraying, only for my eyes to be hijacked by the large breasts on her chest. Held firmly in place by a peculiar manner of top that showed an unreasonable amount of under-boob, which I happened to be looking at from down below. Regardless, I quickly looked away in embarrassment and stole another look at her face which was probably for being amazed I was still holding on. If I ignored how deathly afraid of the situation I was for a moment, she was without a doubt a beauty on the level of the other two girls.

As though it was waiting for the revelation to finally sink it I heard the sickening sound of fabric ripping as the last threads of the cloak failed to hold up my weight. I felt myself decelerate and then accelerate in the other direction. Downward. Spinning over and over It took a few seconds to right myself into a free fall, my belly down and my arms and legs spread out. Maybe I was hoping to create little more drag? I still had the cloak in my hand, maybe a makeshift parachute. Well, I guess that just goes to show how desperate I am. About now should be when my life flashes before my eyes, but without a memory to my name, I wasn't even granted that small concession. Either way, the ground was quickly approaching and I had about another fifteen seconds until I hit the ground at terminal velocity. That wasn't something I was going to survive and I started screaming when all other options failed.

I was on a collision course with the rooftops over Ifern any second now. Maybe if I had some sleep I would have thought about how bad an idea this all was. Maybe I was sleeping. Perhaps it was all a bad dream. A bad dream within a bad dream. Maybe when I hit the ground I would wake up. I'd just have to hope it doesn't hurt and I wake up right away.

A different kind of pain seized me though, someone clamped down on my shoulders with a vice like grip the likes of which I had never had the displeasure of feeling before. I was then struck by a flurry of wind from above and the sound of fluttering leather. My feet reached within about five meters or so of the Ifern rooftops before my direction became horizontal instead of vertical very suddenly. Once more I felt my stomach sink as gravity pulled me down and something pulled me up. I looked down below and saw the ground moving quickly past and get smaller and smaller. My best guesses put the speed at just over hundred and fifty kilometers per hour before we reached a stable cruising speed. The icy wind was hitting my face and I could hardly say a word let alone scream and demand an explanation for this. Instead I hung there, freezing as we traveled in a straight line for another five minutes into the mountains beyond Ifern and the paths winding throughout the mountains.

Suddenly we dipped down between the peaks and I finally spotted our destination. The only possible destination, a lone cave carved out of the mountain and carved out of the glacial like ice caps of these towering peaks. A few beats of her wings and our speed quickly decelerated to sane levels as we glided into the cave. I'm sure this girl knows how to land properly carrying someone, or she expected my legs to act as landing hear, because when my feet reached ground again my frozen legs crumpled and although we had glided to a near stop I stumbled and rolled forward coming to a crash in a pile of bones. Yes, bones. That was definitely the last thing I wanted to see. A pile of bleached white animal bones. Goat, deer, the works. Worse, the cold was making my entire body shut down, the last of my energy being spent, my adrenaline all tapped out I finally felt my eyelids close as once again, I drift off into unconsciousness instead of slumber.

The last thing I saw was the girl approach. Her taloned feet thudding; thundering as they scraped against the cave floor.

Chapter 40

I stirred from a dreamless sleep and jolted awake feeling immediately the familiar sensation of being confined and constrained, a rather bothersome persistent and run of the mill situation for myself as of late. Before my eyes could adjust I flung my arms and sat upright with a start, like an animal that had yet to accept that the cage surrounding it was unbreakable regardless of how many times it has failed in the past... A reaction born of fear and well rehearsed by now, a rather depressing thing to think about, how this kind of thing was not unfamiliar to me. However, instead of the clatter of bone or searing pain I found my movements were not hindered for long and what had been binding me was thrown off easily. A flutter of brown fabric fluttered down and settled around my waist and soon after I was assaulted by the bitter sting of cold. A crackle of embers from a fire caught my adjusting eyes to the meager glow from a makeshift campfire just out of arms reach, most of the wood fuel already charred black.

All around was the stone walls of a cave dug into what I presume one of the taller mountains in this region. Now that I was awake and moving about I started to notice I was breathing more often and heavier with each breath, the air must be thin so thin that this entire area must be edging near three thousand meters above sea level. Just a guess, I wonder why such a specific number popped out of my head? Regardless, I wasn't acclimatized to this kind of environment. Considering how tired I was earlier, it's no wonder I passed out like a light for so long. I shook my head and rubbed the sand and sleep from my eyes with my thumb and index finger and as I did I thought, 'What now? What fine mess have you gotten yourself into this time?'

“Fu fu fu~ Awake at last?” A voice called out from the darkness.

I shook violently and my body went tense and rigid, for a moment like a startled animal freezing in place hoping in vain the predator close by hadn't seen it yet. There certainly wasn't anywhere else to run. There was only one dark passageway leading from this little alcove deep within this cave. Most likely the exit and beyond that a sheer drop hundreds if not thousands of meters down.

The unmistakable feminine voice trying to sound masculine called out again, “Fear not. For you shall not come to harm. You are in the presence of the safest place for leagues around.”

As she spoke her voice echoed off the walls. It was as though she was purposefully throwing her voice in an act of ventriloquism, but the more she spoke, the easier it was to hone onto her location. Once she spoke, I was distinctly aware of a presence nearby, like a pin prick under my scalp telling me danger was nearby. After her cryptic pseudo-introduction, she hadn't spoken another word. It felt as though she was waiting for something and even as the seconds ticked by, five then ten of them, she still said nothing.

“Who are you?” I finally asked.

As though waiting for just those exact words the voice from the darkness spoke up again with extra gusto, “I am the guardian of these mountains. I bring justice to evil and mercy for the innocent. A mighty rival to the immoral and guardian of the helpless...”

As her long winded speech droned on and on, singing her own praises in the most shameless and embarrassing way possible, I started to figure out the acoustics of the cave and my eyes adjusted more thoroughly, I spotted a looming silhouette hanging to the wall outside the sphere of light.

“I am the bright burning flame underneath a shroud of wickedness blanketing the-”

“Yeah yeah, you can hurry up and come out now. I can see you.” I said rather impatiently.

Her voice came to a halt at once and her entire silhouette violently twitched once from shock. Muttered quietly under her breath a single, 'wha?' I noticed the distinctive and forced masculine accent was missing.

I pointed my finger in her direction next and made my tone a little more strict, “Yeah... You.”

There was an awkward silence and if there were such a thing as alpine crickets, I'm sure you would hear them chirp right about now. The girl was not deterred for long though and once more she let out a curt laugh.

“Fu fu fu, I see your powers of perception are above average. It seems I have erred and underestimated you.” She spoke again with her husky voice.

I stood up straight and faced the figure in the darkness as she

materialized into what light this quaint little cave had. Emerging from shadows was exactly who I expected. With green horns and reptile fins for ears, her face was lit from below like some cheesy flashlight during a summer campfire horror story. A slightly oval face and wide expressive eyes which conflicted with the serious and imposing image she tried so hard to impose. I couldn't help but see her face as anything other than cheerful and excited, so her performance came off as campy. Her attempt to compensate came with her arms which were crossed over her chest; arms that were mostly wings that didn't even have hands. From her wrists, a leathery flight membrane connected to her armpits which both took up the lion's share of her wings' surface area.

She slowly moseyed forward on a pair of long legs tapering off at the knees into what looked like calves and feet that belonged on a prehistoric dinosaur. Like a pair of high boots which eventually melded back from green dragon scales arrayed like splint mail armor to the soft white human skin of her upper thighs. Each toe of hers dexterously clattered and scratched against the stone floor like fingers drumming against a tabletop, each one looking as powerful as an arm on its own and tipped with long and menacing ivory talons.

As she came closer I was immediately made aware of one other very jarring physical feature, the closer she got, the more she was illuminated by the fire, I noticed she was tall. Very tall. She must be a little over two meters tall and the closer the more I had to lean my head back to maintain eye contact as we stared one another down. Suddenly she sunk down and lowered her center of mass and threw out one of her arms, an arm much like that of a prehistoric pterodactyl. Along with it came the sound of rustling leather as the scaly membrane making up her wing snapped taut. The total length of her wing span from tip of the wing extending far past her talon fingers was staggering, the length from right tip to left has to be about three and a half meters in total. I'm pretty sure I understand how a sea creature feels when it runs into a puffer fish.

With a snap, she extended her other arm upwards toward the ceiling and impressively almost reaching it with ease. With arms arrayed like a clock, she rotated her arms clockwise like a windmill as she continued her performance.

“I am the Dark Wing Drake...”

Then she pulled back her left elbow and shot her right arm forward into my face, nearly grazing my face with those claws of hers

as the rest of her wing rushed past me. I couldn't help but flinch like an amateur boxer in his first fight and I nearly fell backward onto my ass before quickly pulling back my other foot to balance myself.

“Defender of the Wyrmbacks...”

Pulling her arms back and crossing her wings over her chest and wrapping them around her torso she then pulled one leg up like some martial artist from an old Hong Kong kung fu movie before moving her arms rapidly from that stance like she was imitating a series of letters from an alphabet I did not know.

“Christophaclies!”

Finally, the crescendo of her spectacle as she shouts her name at last, she stomps back down with her raised leg, one wing with its talons drawing across her face and freezing in a salute by her temple and the other wing spread out in front of her as she sinks down and bends her knees, as though ready to pounce.

And there she stood, stock still, well, almost. As the moments dragged forward in the awkward aftermath, I think I could see her legs quiver ever so slightly and her arms sway a little as she tried to stay completely still, a heroic looking stalwart expression on her face twitching ever so slightly once every few seconds. I didn't know what she was waiting for. I looked over my shoulder to make sure I was the only one around., but I am the entire audience, right? There wasn't a flashing applause sign, but I decided to clap for her anyways. I felt obligated to for some reason. She suddenly sprung back to life and stood back upright and tall, her legs spread shoulder width apart and resting her claws on her hips and chest puffed out. Just jiggling there like- No! Focus Laven. Focus...

“I suppose I have to follow an act like that...” I groaned. “The name is-.”

“What name you call yourself is of no concern to me. Time is short, Thirteenth.”

Son of a- cutting me off like that so suddenly. So rude. And what the hell is this about, 'thirteenth'?

“Whoa whoa whoa!” I said waving my hand. I made a T with my hands and desperately called for a 'timeout'. “Hold on a second. I just woke up after who knows how long in a cave with someone I've never met before up a mountain I'd never be able to descend if I tried for the rest of my life.”

Which would be a very short one if I slipped just once.

“Damn.” She cursed, clicking her tongue. “You've forgotten everything?”

How the hell? That was a shocking arrangement of words to hear. How the hell does she know that? No. Calm down, Laven. It's just a coincidence.

“The shadowy forces of darkness clench their fist tighter.” She said holding her fingers out and flexing them in a vain attempt to make a fist. “Soon they will choke the life from Domdracveria and with it... Everything else will follow soon after.”

As she prattled on, my brain, which had been waking up slowly had started briefing me on the little details and events that had brought me here. Remembering that, I had to ask-

“Does fighting that evil include sneaking up on the Princess? Like some kind of assassin?”

I gave the best menacing glare I could, which wasn't very much. I had nothing. No weapon, no size advantage, no clue. But so long as I was here and not dead yet, I was going to get to the bottom of all this. That was the least I could do.

“Huh?” She said tilting her head to the side.

Okay. Playing the dumb card a little too often miss.

“Yeah. You.” I said pointing my finger at her face. “Stalking around the Palace dressed like you were. Were you after the Princess? Did you capture me to hold me ransom?”

“Skulk?” She quipped in surprise. “Ransom!?” She yelled angrily. “Who's an assassin?”

She marched right up in my face and looked down on my face wearing a furious expression.

“Why would I do any such disgraceful acts toward Vio?”

Vio? That some sort of cute little nickname for.... The princess? Wait. Hold on. Just what was this monster of a woman talking about- Wait, let's see here: Knows the princess, large, and a wyvern.

“You're the one everyone was talking about.”

“Oh ho?” She laughed, her mood returning to normal in mere moments. “Yes, that's correct. I am Christophaclies. The Dark Wing-”

“-The one that almost plunged this place into civil war!” I interrupted.

Christophaclies looked on with a confused expression as I exploded at her.

“You're the one who has been attacking bandits around here recently. Aren't you?”

“Fu fu fu.” She laughed through her lips, down from the pit of her stomach. “That's correct. It is I, The Dark Wing Drake, the bastion of Justice in these high hills who has been dispatching the evil no one else dare face.”

I cradled my hand in the palm of my hand. I had to wonder who of anyone would play so eloquently into Deron's hands, but now I knew exactly how.

“Go on. The bards will sing songs and regale every one of my exploits and the people will know, the evil that hide among them in the shadows and the ones who hide in their tall towers will know my name and think twice before they ever-”

“Yeah yeah. I already to credit for all that.”

“-Think to commit crimes aga-WHAT?” Christophaclies yelled, her long tail shooting rigid and straight up into the air in outright surprise and anger.

“Don’t you yell at me!” I shot back. “You do realize you almost threw this country into civil war! If they could have pinned that on you, things would have gone to hell by now.”

“Civil war? Hah! A false flag.”

“No, seriously. Look. It's painfully obvious the bandits are just a ploy to get hotheads like you to do something. Hotheaded wyverns that apparently shouldn't be running amok like you are. Prince Deron has been waiting for an excuse to throw Princess Violetta off the throne.”

“Deron?” Christophaclies asked, sounding surprised.

“Yes. Deron. I think that much painfully obvious-”

“The prince would do no such thing!” She hollered as she slid right back into my face and looked down at me.

Whoa. Wait. Hold on. Did she just claim that Deron would do no such thing? I'm pretty sure there isn't a soul alive that wouldn't think twice about that guy being the worst kind of conniving scumbag there are. The kind that only gets away with what they do because they can hide behind their status and no one can or dares call them out on their bullshit. Then it struck me. If this was the wyvern I was thinking about, that would mean she's...

“Just how blind do you have to be?” I decided to be confrontational after all. “Deron has pretty much proven there's nothing that will stop him from becoming King, even if it’s by force.”

“Hold your tongue. You're speaking about the royalty of this country I serve. I won’t forgive eve you, Thirteenth, if you keep going on like that.”

“And who the hell is Thirteenth supposed to be? I am not a number. I am-”

“Laven. Yes, I know full well who you presume to be.”

How the hell does she know my name? Was she stalking after all?

“Fu fu fu. Surprised? Don't be. This much is trivial to someone like me.”

Just how the hell did she... Wait. Thinking back on it now. There was one time...

“Maybe you lost more than just your memories, Thirteenth. If you can't even-”

“Back at the camp. High up on the cliff face. That was you, wasn't it?”

“Erk.” She choked as I interrupted her.

“You were watching over the camp you had just burned

down. I knew I felt someone was watching."

"But I was- How did you?" Her stalwart heroic and gruff tone of voice vaporized for a second as she looked at me with wide eyes full of shock. She then coughed violently before forcing her voice one more, "Fu fu fu. I truly have underestimated you, Thirteenth. Perhaps you are awakened more than I previously thought. To see through my stealth techniques so easily. To think you could sense me from so far away."

"Thirteenth again... Who the hell are you talking about?"

"King Rudright the Great and his Twelve Knights. Except not twelve but the thirteenth. The lost knight. He who stumbled from his mount, thought dead but his spirit roams free. When I look upon you, I think you might just be..."

As her voice trailed off she stepped even closer, right into my personal space, and looked down at me, her eyes glued to me, almost dragging across me as she was lost deep in thought.

"Uh..." I grimaced, trying to back away, only to have her follow me unerringly.

"Whether you are or not. I cannot have you move freely after seeing my face. I thought that only someone special could keep up with me. Only someone of stern stuff could hold on while I soared. Only someone with great courage could be so persistent as you were. When I looked down and saw it the man on the mountain path just days ago... There are no coincidences. Maybe... Just maybe..."

And there she went off into her own little world again.

"Wait." I cried out, suddenly realizing. "So you do admit that you know you're not supposed to be just running about doing whatever you want? You're not holding me hostage to-"

"Because their agents are everywhere!" She suddenly screamed, throwing her wings to the sides with a mighty flap.

The short burst of wind from just that wing buffet alone almost sent me flying backward. When I regained my balance, the first thing I thought was, 'Do I really want to know?'

"The evil in the shadows. The one behind the bandits. There is no way they could organize on their own like they have. I've fought them. Brought justice to them. They scatter like leaves in the wind like

any other bandits. Something else more sinister is at work here."

And this something sinister is not Prince Deron? I'm really starting to feel that I don't want to know what she's going to say next. It sounds like she's on the right track but about to come to some crazy conclusion.

"A world spanning empire of evil. Bent on nothing but complete dominance of all life..."

Oh crap here it comes.

"The Free Brewers!"

A moment of silence. An awkward moment of silence, I felt like I was producing enough to make up for dozens of others. That didn't seem to stop of faze Christophaclies.

"With their alchemy, they fester like a disease. A disease in the shadows. And it shall be me who- Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

"I've had enough." I said. "I don't care about the climb anymore. I just want to leave now."

Ignoring the protests and calls from behind me I just kept walking and left the cave. Rounding the corner and leaving the warm fire behind me only to be faced with a wall of white. Not even a glint of light shone in on the passageway leading outside, instead a wall of gusting wind carrying a fine white powder being deposited in a pile at the entrance. A raging tempest enveloping the mountaintop, blocking all escape. Perfect just perfect.

"Where do you think you're going? You'll freeze to death." Christophaclies scolded me, worrying about me.

She appeared from around the corner and I turned around to face her. I ignored the biting cold from the storm that the fire had been holding at bay.

"Okay. Look." I said regaining my composure. "You're a busy girl. I get that now. Lots of things to do, world to save. Me? I'm busy myself. So if you could drop me back off at Ifern when the storm is over... I'd appreciate it."

“That I cannot do.”

“No, seriously. I won’t tell a soul about what I've seen. Or saw. You can have my word on that. I'll just-”

I stopped as she looked down at the floor, distraught. Oh no. Don't do that to me now. No. Ain't gonna work. No way in hell...

“Look. I don't know who you think I am, but whatever it is you're going to ask next. Just know the answer is-”

“Laven.” She said resolutely.

“JUST KNOW,” I stressed heavily. “That my answer is-”

“I have almost uncovered the secrets and ciphers of the Free Brewers. Fu fu fu, an easy task for me, but a long one. I am on the verge of find thing evil and when I do, it will not stand before my flame and talon. I will find it, and tear its tendrils from the land in one swift blow.”

Okay, not liking the sound of this now.

“The bandit's main base! The heart of the beast. From there, all their plans laid bare. Not even the Free Brewers will leave the place unscathed of clues!”

Just what part of this does the girl not get? If she gets spotted and creates witnesses like last time... I don't think even I could in the most favorable conditions pull off what I did before. Deron would find out of certain and he would march on the capital again. This time with a full army.

“What does this have to do with me?” I said snapping back at her.

She pointed at me with her right wing, “You are a man of justice, are you not? Now is the time to deliver it! This is not a task I seek to greedily devour by myself. Your help is wanted. No. Needed. No! Justice demands it!”

No way in hell. Absolutely not. If she goes ahead and pulls this off after just scraping by and defying the odds yesterday, it will lead to war for sure.

“You're gonna throw a rock at the hornet's nest? You realize

what could happen right? Everything could go right to hell."

"Evil may only triumph when good does nothing! I care not what becomes of me, but there is no price too steep to pay if it means evil may be brought to justice!"

Ugh, this isn't going to go anywhere. Is there no way to stop this? My thoughts keeping turning over and over again inside my head, unable to start and gain any traction to how I could stop her. She seems impervious to logic. Delusional and not in touch with reality. How do you reason with a person like that? I'm pretty sure I couldn't stop her physically if you gave me a hundred years either... There is one option... No. Absolutely not. Suicide. It's suicide. Completely moronic. It would be better to rot in this cave instead... Just like at the castle with nothing to do... Aw crap. I'm remembering that feeling of listless helplessness again.

"Alright! Fine! You win." I shouted. I'll help you."

Christophaclies' face brightened and she gave out a hearty laugh and wrapped a wing around my shoulder and pulled me closer.

"Good. Good! I'm sure with the thirteenth that the Free Brewers and whatever plan they have in store will be no match."

I think this is the only option I have right now. If there is anything I can do, it's try to reign this girl in. If I can prevent what happened at the burnt out bandit camp from happening again, then mission accomplished. Either way, if Deron and his bandits have indeed left some clue behind, maybe we can turn the tables and implicate him instead. Even if this girl denies it, maybe, just maybe, if I can convince her I can convince the whole kingdom. I just hope Rose and Susan can hold down the fort.

Chapter 41

A whipping whirlwind of a snow swirled all around and visibility wasn't any further than about four hundred meters in any direction, just enough for me to keep an eye on the flicker of a dozen orange flames in the distance some three hundred meters below. Leaning on my stomach and holding onto the rocks and icicles of this sheer mountain face I looked on, peeking through makeshift slits between my fingers to prevent snow-blindness. I wish I had my binoculars about now. Straining my eyes like this for the past few hours was taking its toll and I could still hardly see a thing. Everything seemed to have no effect on this woman though.

With one leg raised and talon wrapped around the slippery and icy rocks, a wing resting on her knee and holding herself up, she leaned over and watched the orange flames flicker below. The howls of the win were fierce, but her monologuing was more than a match for it as she yelled down to no one in particular down below.

“Enjoy your last moments of freedom, you miserable wretches. When the snows fade and the winds dies, you'll know justice.”

I pulled back the hood of my fur parka enough to reveal my mouth and shouted back, “This could have waited, you know?”

“Nonsense. Justice is not afraid of weather, but it demands to be swift. When the storm has passed, we will begin at once!”

Dammit. I didn't spend the last few hours trying to come up with a plan and drill it into this girl's head for nothing. I came here to prevent her from just barging in and demolishing everything like the last camp. Although, I'm kind of curious to actually see it happen, but there are more pressing matters. First and foremost being the consequences if we leave a wake of absolute destruction. This camp seemed different from the other one and as I am led to believe by the rantings of the wyvern girl, much bigger than even the others that surround Ifern.

“Listen!” I yelled out louder than before. “If you go in and destroy the place like last time, everyone is gonna know for sure there's a wyvern flying around. Deron was about to can the Princess over a little thing like that.”

“Go and destroy it like last time? Fu fu fu. But of course.”

“No dammit!” I stood up and while carefully watching my

footing walked right up to her in order to get in her face. “Don't pretend you only heard bits of that because of the wind!”

“Blow it to bits you say? Ha ha! You sure are enthusiastic. I like that.”

With one wing, she wrapped it around my shoulder and pulled me in, smushing my cheek against her own as she looked onward. With her other wing, she pointed with the talons on the tip of her forearm the best she could to somewhere in particular down below. The oblivious skinship on her part wasn't making it any easier to rebuke her on top of her stubborn and abrasive nature of hers while living in that little world in her head. She had a slight sulfuric smell to her as well, almost like roasted garlic.

“Their guard is down because of the storm. When it passes, there won’t be sentries at their posts for a short time. Getting inside will be easy.” She had decided based on nothing.

“Yes yes. Just like I suggested this morning. From there we-”

“Without a warning of my approach from above, their defeat will be swift, a blow dealt and justice will be done! Before dinner time too.”

“No, seriously. Listen.” I said trying to remain calm. “We can't afford anyone knowing we were here. We don't have the time to figure out how to infiltrate. We can't sneak up when the thing is built on top of its own little mountain like this. The only option is from above.”

Even through the snowstorm I could make out the perimeter of the fort. Tall palisade walls. Winding trails carved out of the sides of the mountain that wound up toward the fort, not even wide enough for a cart. Attacking this place from below would be all but impossible. I don't know how many caverns are hidden within that rock, but maybe it could last for years even you besieged it. Maybe it was an abandoned fort from centuries ago? That bandits would be able to just waltz on inside and take control of it though.

I can hardly believe the military and the rulers of this Kingdom would just let that happen. They did though and it gave these bandits their own little impenetrable citadels to launch their raids onto the highways and trade lanes crisscrossing this mountainous country. From these few locations surrounding the capital, it is possible to choke the life out of it pretty easily. I suppose these were originally

built so it would be impossible for any army to do just that or hop, skip and jump past them and attack the capital. Not without a small army behind you to wreak havoc on your supply line Now they were being used for the opposite reason of their original purpose and with depressing effectiveness.

That said, the only way into this place would be from above. The only way that wouldn't take months if not years and the loss of hundreds of men. A few dozen of these wyvern girls could probably make short work out of this entire fort, if they were half the wyvern this Christophaclies is. There was only one right now. I won't begin to talk about what I can do, which is a lot of nothing on my own. I'm only here as the sound rational one. The one voice of common sense in a swirling mass of madness. However, if there's a lead inside this place that points us in the direction of who is behind this, then the reward is worth the risk. I had a hunch as to what was going on, but I didn't have the proof. One shred of proof is all I need here, then we can skedaddle. Now all I need to do is convince girl wonder here that when the lid is blown off this plot, the wyverns can be sent and deal with this properly.

"And from above we shall descend, like the very rays of the sun and like the sun's brilliant light, blow away the darkness!"

Weren't you going off earlier about how you were the dark winged one?

Trying not to think about it I desperately tried to get it into her head, "This is a covert mission. Co-vert." I stressed the t long and hard so that maybe it would get through those dragon-like ears of hers. "If even one person sees you and the story gets out that a wyvern is flying around attacking people, even if they're bandits, then it's going to reflect badly on the Princess. Very badly."

I saw a visible tic set off across Christophaclies' face. Right about when I mentioned the Princess. I think I may have found my back door entrance behind that obstinate and stubbornness this girl throws up that allows her to bulldoze through everything. She turned and looked me right in the eyes, her attention finally on me. Now was my chance.

"If the people think their ruler can't control her own wyvern, do you think they're gonna trust her with the whole kingdom?"

"I-" She started up again with renewed vigor and heroism

dripping from her tone.

I interrupted her immediately, refusing to let the conversation go back to her own pace, “Did she order to go around mopping up bandits?”

She was silent for a few seconds, then she looked away before simply saying, “No.”

“Pretty sure you need orders to go around doing things like attacking people inside your kingdom. Right? That said, I don't see why you can't just fly and be where you want. So, we'll just be there when someone says something or take something from the bandits. No one cares if you steal from bandits, even if you're not allowed to harm them.”

The girl's lips pursed. Great, now she was pouting. However, I think I got my point across.

“Very well,” She said at last. “We shall do it your way. However!”

'However?' And things were going so well too. I don't want to hear it.

“However.” She said again, wagging one of her wings foretalons in the air as she turned back to look at me, a wide grin on her face. “I am allowed to defend you and myself. You are a guest of Vio, right?”

“W-well, yes.” I mumbled.
Aw shit...

“You still can't just go getting caught! I know what you're thinking. Don't even-”

“The storm is letting up.” She said turning back to look at the camp down below.

I didn't notice a change, but the girl's eyes were fixed. After about another twenty seconds I noticed the visibility gradually improve. The whitewashing wall of falling snow started to subside and breaks in the cloud cover overhead were multiplying with a rapid pace. I was left wondering how exactly this girl could sense the storm breaking moments beforehand. When I looked back down though, she had already vanished. I heard the scuff of rocks behind me and the girl

gripping onto the cliff face with her feet, knees bent, looking dead ahead, brimming with enthusiasm. As though she was going to kick off and-

"Whoa whoa whoa! I didn't say anything about going anywhere yet!"

"Let's go!" She cheerfully yelled and kicked off the cliff face

"Hold on. I didn't-Fuuuuuck!"

She did so with such speed and force that I didn't even have a chance to duck or weave out of the way as the green blur swooped over my head and a pair of powerful vices gripped my shoulder. It felt very much like the safety harness on a roller coaster cart clamping down and pinning me down. I wasn't even given the luxury of the long climb to the top, it was straight to the drop as the two of us took to the air and began a slow and silent decent downward as she made like a glider and circled around the fort from above. The wind and the snow was still ricocheting off my face almost like hail and I don't know what had gotten into her head to think this was appropriate flying weather, but the subtle movements and angling of her wings eliminated turbulence to zero.

I couldn't do much other than hand on tight to her talons like the steering toggles of a parachute until we finally dropped behind an old and crumbling stone hut on the far right side of the fort within its walls. I broke off into a run as we came in for the swooping landing and stumbled a few steps forward before managing to come to a stop just before colliding with a stack of wooden crates.

"Nice landing!" Christophaclies said, giving me what I think was the best thumbs up she could manage. She flapped her wings a few more times before finally tucking them in and touching down herself.

"Shhh!" I shushed, "Whispering only. We need to be quiet." I said quietly while I walked back to talk quietly into her 'ear'.

"Very well." She said just as quietly, imitating me and holding one wing up between our two faces.

Not long after we had made touchdown, the last bit of the storm was giving way and the final flakes of snow left in the gray clouds above were thrown down below. The early evening dusk was finally able to punch through the cloud cover and slowly paint the landscape

a dull red which reflected off the newly laid snow. An improvement over the lifeless gray. This fresh snow would be a disadvantage, we wouldn't want to make the amateur mistake and leave footprints for the first guard to spot. As soon as I thought about it, on cue came out from the buildings the bandits in all their vicious and grubby splendor. Wrapped head to toe in thick furs and cloth, even more so than I was. I recalled Rose saying that one guy was from some South Islands or something. If these were indeed mercenaries like I thought and not just out of control locals, their being unable to cope with the cold was very telling.

Still hidden behind a pile of crates I ducked down and held my breath as two of the bandits walked by, the crunching of the fresh snow under their feet making me feel more at ease, the white noise masking our own presence. Sticking close behind me and watching me intently and mimicking my every move was the wyvern, someone managing to crouch down and hide herself just barely behind the same crates. Just as well, because the two bandits came to a stop just behind them and just in front of us. My heart sunk until they started speaking to one another.

“Screw this cold. Damn this weather. Ain't it supposed to be summer?” One complained.

“Not Dommy Summer. I think they get about a month or two of it if lucky.”

“So why make us assemble in the yard afterward? It's cold as balls out here.”

“Because boss has something to say to everyone. Mess hall ain’t big enough for all the lads to hear. He ain't much for making the same talk two or three times. So shut your yap, stop complaining and hurry your ass up. If we're late again I'm saying that because I had to kick your teeth in and I will.”

“Piss off. Like to see you try.” The other growled.

The two of us stayed stone still as the two of them left, only moving to stick my head out and watch which direction of the fort the two of them started to head off to. I pulled back to see stars and sparkles glistening in Christophaclies' eyes.

“The boss... The big bad making his appearance so soon. Lucky!”

“I told you. We waited and now we get to listen in on what's

going on. You don't get these kinds of things if you kick the door down and barge in."

"I've been hunting this villain down for months now. Let's go, justice will not wait!"

Her 'arm' curled around underneath my own, locked in place with incredible strength and pulled me along as she stood up and trudged across the fort grounds. I tried to stop, I tried to say something, but she insisted on twisting and turning throughout all the winding back alleys and crevices of all the crumbling and dilapidated buildings. How did she know exactly where to go?

"Slow down. Slow down. Don't hurry. One wrong turn into-"

"I did not watch and observe from above this place to make such an amateur mistake. Rest assured, Laven."

"Through that snow storm?" I asked skeptically.

"Eyes sharp like the owl's, and precise as the hawk. no evil may escape my gaze!"

Half a kilometer through a snowstorm and little light because of thick cloud cover... That's a little absurd. How little light needs to reach those eyes and their magnification... That's beyond superhuman, but then again, she isn't exactly human. If they aren't bats, anything that flies needs excellent eyesight, so I guess it isn't too surprising. Still, her eyes have to be on par with a pair of expensive low light binoculars.

After carefully navigating through the fort with her lead, we finally reached the edge of a large marshaling field and ducked behind a pyramid of supply crates. On the other side dozens of men armed to the teeth and wrapped in thick furs were assembling. Those couple dozen soon multiplied and in the area about the size of a soccer field, hundreds were packing in shoulder to shoulder. All of them looking toward a raised wooden platform, a stage where at last a large and broad shouldered man appeared. Unlike the other bandits, he has chosen to not wear anything above his waist, perhaps as a show of strength to the other men. The only things wrapped around a hairy barrel chest were two bandoleers attached to two wing hooks holding stead two large pairs of axes and each strap holding onto a collection of throwing knives. Two massive patches of scar tissue on each cheek told a story of many fights, or maybe acts to show pain tolerance. Either way, this guy oozed the air of a biker gang leader, only without the bike.

“Alright, shut your faces, the lot of you!” The man bellowed out at last. “Gerald has had enough of your crap. This is just like last year and you still can't do anything but complain.”

Gerald. The name rung a bell.

“Bad news this time. Seems the crew up north got hit hard.”

The crowd mumbled as they all looked and talked with one another in a stir.

“Shut up!” He screamed, silencing the crowd right away. “You're acting like a bunch of scared little girls. When did anyone tell you this was a safe job. You know how much you're being paid? We're being paid to make sure nothin' gets into Ifern. Each one of you will be a dead man if you don't make that happen.”

“Why didn't we get a call for help?” Someone in the crowd yelled out.

“Because the whole place went up in just one night.”

The entire crowd really stirred now. A crowd of big tough men, but their kind is always a little skittish, especially of superstitious stuff. If someone were to pass around a rumor about a curse right about now, it'd probably spread like wildfire.

“Shut up!” The boss screamed again, bringing everyone back to obedient silence. “The guy paying us said if something like that happened, it meant we've won. The only thing that could do that is a wyvern. I got told that was mighty illegal thing to do.”

“So now what?” A voice from the crowd yelled out.

“We send a few guys to scope it out. We'll have to send a new crew to fix the place up and take over. Until we get our final pay, we have to make sure no one makes it through. Ifern can't feed itself with whatever they got stowed away forever. It's been more than a year now too. So shut the hell up about how cold it is. We're almost done here. I got news something big Is gonna happen too. I take it that means we're almost done here.”

The crowd stirred again, but this time happily, so the boss on stage let them be for a bit.

“Then how about we celebrate a little!” A random voice cried out.

“It's cold and boring as hell up here. I haven't had a little comfort woman in forever.” Complained another.

“That's because the contract said to pass over any Dommy we catch.” The boss said sternly. “You can go muck about back home all you want with your last paycheck all you want. Get drunk and lie around in brothels all you want for the next two years if ya want.”

“Stop complaining,” A gruff voice bellowed from deep in the crowd. “Not much more than dommies around up here. You lost dice fair and square that one time.”

“Then you go and break em in a week. You rat bastards!”

An uproarious laughter. I didn't want to think about it, but it made me a little ill. I shook my head to clear out the bad thoughts and turned to Christophaclies.

“See, they got a paper trail, they're sending over captives somewhere. If we can find out where- Ack.”

Christophaclies gold eyes were burning hot and she was practically seething. I don't think she was able to sit on her feelings and put a lid on it. I looked back at the man standing on the stage for a moment.

“Shut up. Like I said; a good one in five of you is gonna have to pack up your crap and be ready to move out and to North fort tomorrow. I expect the guys I sent to be back tomorrow. Now get back to your drills. Oh yeah, we're also doubling the watch. Now that the storm is gone. We gotta worry about up top too.”

“Okay.” I said sighing. “Looks like we got lucky to get in here. We just need to find out where they're sending these-”

I went to put my hand on Christophaclies' shoulder but found nothing but air. I slowly turned my head to look where she was only to find a lot of nothing. I felt my heart sink and I really wish I didn't know what to expect next, but I think I damn well knew.

The boss continued issuing his orders, “Get those towers fixed before the week is out too. We'll post men up there. Keep a watch on the cliffs too. Before-”

“Before it is too late, evil doers!” A deep and heroic voice

called out.

Dammit. I hate when I'm right.

The crowd turned toward our direction, standing tall with her talons dug into the stone of a crumbling wall, Christophaclies perched with her wings crossed over her chest and glaring down fearlessly at the assembly of hundreds of bandits.

“Fu fu fu, too late. Far too late! Your judgment has already arrived.”

Much like back at the cave, as she continued to speak she threw out her wings like someone signaling with flags. Like an air traffic controller on the flight deck. A special and obsessively thought out meaning behind each stroke.

“What the hell?” Came from the crowd time and time again until one at last cried out, “Wyvern!”

“Your evils have come to an end at last. Your judgment has descended from the heavens and retribution for your heinous acts is at hand. All those who wish to not be burned away by the fire of righteous retribution, throw down your weapons. All others, face the dire wrath of heartfelt anger from every soul your foul hands have stained with your callous and wicked ways!”

I could do nothing but helplessly watch from below and stare up at her profile as she faced off against a small army on her own. Even through her yelling, I thought I could hear the distinctive sound of sinew. It was faint, but my mind was focused on danger and my senses. There wasn't anything I could do before I heard the distinctive twang and flutter of fletch and wizz as something flew through the air.

“All those who dare fight justice, tremble before the might of the Dark Wing Drake. Know that-”

Mid speech an arrow let loose from a long composite bow struck against Christophaclies' chest. Right at her heart. However, instead of a sickening thud, or the sound of flesh tearing, I heard the sound of steel on steel. Ricocheting off her large left breast, an arrow deflected off, spun in the air and landed in the snow right next to me, not thirty centimeters away. Curiosity getting the better of me, I lifted it up before my eyes to get a look at it. The broadhead was rolled, blunted on one side as though it had struck a wall. From that angle, it had been deflected and thrown upward, down to where I was. When I

looked back up, there was nothing but silence, Christophaclies had stopped her monologue, a random bandit in the crowd with a bow raised, his drawstring still vibrating his hands still frozen in the position he let the arrow loose with was just as shocked as everyone else.

Christophaclies' top had a slight tear in it where the arrow had hit, there was also a small cut, only slightly bleeding and looked no worse than a bad paper cut only three centimeters across. That girl's eyes were downcast, her bangs hanging over and casting a shadow over her face. Soon she was trembling a little.

"Why you..." She snarled. "You dare..."

She started taking deep breaths, her shoulders heaving. At first I thought she was just trying to calm down, but I remembered exactly who it was that I was looking at. My judgment had the better of my disbelief and I cupped my hands over my hood and pressed down on my ears as hard as I could as she took one last long breath.

She let out a shrill shriek, "INTERRUPT ME?"

It wasn't a normal shriek, it was a scream mustered with all the air deep inside her lungs. Her voice carried on long like an opera singer's and I think I could actually see the slight shock wave as the decibels spread out like an invisible explosion. The brittle rocks and wood within about ten meters creaked, cracked and splintered as though her very voice was shattering them. The bandits before her all clasped onto their ears in pain. I don't blame them, I could feel the ringing in my ears even though I had prepared myself. It was as though I had stood by a main amp at a rock concert during a sound test.

Immediately afterward she sucked in the cold mountain air through her clenched teeth as she took another deep breath. I think I heard the boss screaming at his men to, 'get down!' But I could hardly hear him, so I doubt most of his men did. Filling her lungs up with air, her chest puffing out noticeably, she threw her head back and then snapped it forwards, maw wide open. What I saw reminded me of old war footage you see on a documentary on the Vietnam War. A jet stream of napalm exploding from her throat, a cone of fire that swept back and forth. Everywhere it touched, that place was lit up and that was quite a bit because it had about a range of thirty meters. It was instant immolation and along with it, instant panic. A bunch of bandits all crowded together, many of them shoulder to shoulder in some places. There was hardly anywhere to run, but run many of them tried.

The smell of sulfur and what smelled like petroleum broke the pure and gentle crisp mountain air and soon after that, the smell of burning flesh and hair. A sea of bandits fled from the corner of the marshaling yard to cover, trying to arm themselves if they weren't already. Those already a safe distance away notched their arrows, but it was too late, the wyvern had already taken to the air after a few powerful beats of her wings. The fresh snow covering the ground had erupted into steam when the fire had reached it, creating scalding clouds of vapor, vapor that swept over the rest of the crowd, blocking their vision. Not that seeing her would help, the speed she picked up as she began to strafe the crowd was still far beyond what I thought was reasonable. Reaching speeds of one hundred kilometers per hour, she kicked down with her talons at groups of bandits who were thrown to the ground and every other direction.

“Ditch the broads! Get the bodkins!” One bandit yelled.

“Get these men out of here. Get some of that snow on the burns! Hurry up!” Screamed another trying to get the uninjured and still unarmed to clear out the wounded.

“It's just one. How?” Another shell-shocked and standing idly by mumbled.

Christophaclies' rampage continued overhead as the bandits scrambled helplessly down below. The arrows they flung up cascading back down on top of the field on their comrades. The occasional arrow, perhaps one out of twenty, that reaches its mark simply deflecting harmlessly off her scales and skin. I don't know what those scales are made of, but even beneath that soft white skin there must be something tougher than steel underneath. Standing there dumbfounded by the ever increasing carnage swirling around me no matter how chaotic it got, not a bit of flame got close and neither did she make a diving pass on a collision course with myself. Perhaps she was more in control than I was giving her credit for?

I felt a hand on my shoulder that shook me back to reality, something I wasn't expecting at my heart nearly jumped out of my chest. When I turned around I saw a bandit breathing heavily with what looked like rope coiled up and held underneath his arm.

“Hey! You! You hurt?” He asked demandingly.

“N-no.” I stuttered.

“Good. Help me with these nets.”

“Nets?”

“Yeah. We can't do anything unless you can trip her up. Get some rope on her, tie up those wings, get a hold on her and drag her down. Grab this end and we'll try to hook her on one of her passes.”

I guess I was dressed in furs and with my face obscured by my parka's hood I could be mistaken as just another one of his comrades. I sloppily caught the rope and part of the net he tossed to me.

“That you Tom?” He finally asked, at last feeling something may be amiss.

I quickly scrambled, “You can't use this net and rope. It's frayed.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Right here.” I said pointing at no spot in particular.

The guy walked over and with a worried look on his face came closer.

“I'm not seeing it... We don't have time for this!”

“No, really. Right here. Look!”

He came right up and looked at where my finger was placed on the net, held it up with one of his hands, freeing one of my own and when he looked up again and was about to say something I slammed my fist into his face as hard as I could. I felt something crack and I hope it isn't my knuckles. I let my hand got limp and let it flop around a few times and then flexed my fingers. Although they hurt like hell I don't think I broke or bruised them. I watched the last couple seconds of the bandit falling over backwards, his limbs having gone loose and limp. I pilfered the axe tied around his waist and used it as a cutting edge to snap the outer rungs of the net and then tossed it onto the ground into a heap. Let no one say that I don't help.

I then ran out into the field, amid all the death, pain and chaos. Why? I'm not quite sure, but since someone had run along my hiding spot, I wasn't safe even standing still anymore. Especially with an unconscious body nearby with a fist shaped mark on it. Now only might he wake up answering questions about that and getting away with it was beyond my ability right now. There was a still a job to be done too.

In the chaos, I needed to figure out some clue as to where these prisoners were being taken to. If we found that out, I'm sure we'd also find out what has been going on in this country. As I raced across the field, I soon found perhaps the quickest but most dangerous route. The hulking figure of the bandit's boss slinking away from the battlefield.

“Gerald. You're a target out here.” A man following him pleaded.

“Shut up. Gerald knows. Dammit. How the hell did she-” He then looked my way and locked his eyes on me. “Who the hell is that?” Gerald growled.

“That'd be... Wait.” His escort fumbled, unable to answer.

'Fuck it', I thought. The both of them were still a good ten meters ahead, so I hefted the axe and drew it back over my shoulder and let it fly with all my strength. Spinning in the air the axe head came into contact with the other bandit's shoulder. Burrowing deep inside he gave out a cry and fell backward onto the ground.

There was only a quick look of surprise on his face and I didn't waste any time rushing headlong into the man. He was still armed and I wasn't, the only good thing about that being his axes were still in the rings attached to his belt. Reaching a full sprint rather quickly and nimbly bounding over the ankle high snow I spear tackled the man. Catching Gerald flatfooted allowed me to knock him off his feet and fly backwards into yet another pile of wooden crates which exploded into potatoes which soon became mashed as they broke our fall.

That wasn't perhaps the best idea, I had caught his gut against my shoulder and I avoided crushing my spine as my head could have hit his stomach and compressed like an accordion, but despite that, this guy was heavy, and it took everything I had just to knock him off his feet. I also knew it was a bad idea when he recovered quickly and his sausage fingers wrapped around my neck and threw me backwards off of him with great force. I fell flat against the snow on my back. The snow broke my fall a little, but I was winded for a second, a second too late because Gerald straddled me on the next second and pinned me down.

My instincts and reflexes told me to get ready, so I clenched my teeth and soon after a balled up fist came across my right and threw my head left. When I looked back up another fist came from me left and bowled my face over to the right. I was a little high on adrenaline,

so I didn't feel it as much as I thought I would, but it fucking hurt. A lot. I shook my head to chase away the stars I was seeing only in time to see him raising his two fists joined together into a hammer he was getting ready to bring down straight onto my head. Acting fast I strained my legs, raised my hips high and threw all my weight to the right. The sudden burst of energy succeeded in putting him off balance and force him to roll off to the side and I knew it was too good a chance to pass up because I was a little woozy, so I quickly scampered to my feet and faced off where I guessed he was.

I raised my forearms and fists to each side of my head, like I believe boxers do to shield their head. Which was just as well because a stray fist collided with my left arm, saving my face. I quickly threw out my own jab with my right and grazed his left cheek. I then pulled back a couple steps, but still within lunging distance. Gerald looked at me with wild eyes, filled to the brim with hatred. It was he who attacked first, throwing a wild punch, a very strong and fast punch, but I still ducked under it. It was telegraphed, even to me. That didn't make me feel any better though, because that fist hit some molding stone and I watched it crack and crumble when his meaty hook crash into it.

“Who the hell are you?” He demanded.

“Name's Laven. You're gonna tell me where you sent those captives.”

“Sure. Gerald will tell it to your corpse. After Gerald makes you good and dead.”

“I think that's a bit redundant-”

The parlay was over quickly as another meaty hook came in strong and fast and I could only throw my arm in the way because I couldn't dodge it. If I had taken that punch directly, I wouldn't be surprised if it fractured bone. Thankfully it grazed off my arm at an angle. It was a small comfort though. It looks like I didn't have the strength to even scratch the guy and I wasn't going to be dodging every punch forever. I was surprised at my own movements, ducking, dodging, weaving and pulling back just out of his reach. Every time I pulled back and he looked ready to reach for his axes, I stepped back in and gave a quick ineffective jab. It was all going nowhere though. He had all the time in the world though. I didn't.

I couldn't even direct where the fight was going. All I could do was back away and try to keep out of range. He looked big. Hell, he was big. But as big and muscly as he was, I was still a bit taller with

much better reach. Still, I realized a little too late when I stole a quick glance over my shoulder that I was getting back up against a wall that was rapidly approaching. I had realized a little too late that he was working toward this all along. It was an unmistakable assumption when he grinned as soon as I noticed.

I wasn't sure what to do. Once my back was against the wall he'd be free to pummel my all he wants. Behind me was no good. If I escaped left or right, he'd be chasing after me with axes. Instead I did the unthinkable and looked up. Circling high above and picking up speed, Christophaclies was starting to come lower and lower until finally she broke that circle and came diving out the sky on a collision course with myself. I threw myself onto the ground and covered the back of my neck with my hands. I think I heard Gerald let out a snort, but then I'm sure we both heard it. First quiet and then a loud and bellowing war cry.

“JuuuuuuuuuuuuuuusssSSSTICEEEEEEEE!”

At a full speed dive Christophaclies grabbed hold of Gerald shoulders and kept going. Christophaclies flew over the short stone wall and Gerald went right through it instead. Luckily for the bandit boss the crumbling wall didn't need much of a push, only his mass plus the high speed of a laden wyvern was enough. I think he only got one quick look at her approaching before his vision was replaced by stones which were thrown in every direction as the wall exploded. On impact Christophaclies let go and let the bandit continued onward with his own momentum as he rolled over and over on the snow covered ground. That snow which lucky for him slowed him down in time to just prevent him from going flying off the plateau, over the cliff and into the valley hundreds of meters below.

Swooping in and landing only just behind him she said resolutely, “...Kick.”

Stomping her way across the snow, she bent over and with the talons on her forearms lifted Gerald with ease by the straps crossing his chest and back and held him over the edge. I climbed over the rubble and slipped through the hole in the wall and hurried toward them.

“Where is he!” She screamed gruffly at his face. “Where is he!” She repeated herself, even gruffer than before.

“Gerald doesn't know what you're talking about!” Gerald

moaned back.

It looked like he really wanted to scream and fight back, but I think his unexpected rendezvous with that wall at about thirty meters per second had broken his everything. The G-forces of that acceleration and the speed at which he hit that wall... I wouldn't expect anything else even from a body built solid like his. I should know. I've hit one before myself in much the same way.

I stepped in and short of trying to get her to pull back from the edge I suppose I had no choice but to play 'good cop'.

“I don't think you have much leeway, Gerald.”

“Ha ha ha.” He laughed weakly, coughing up a little blood. “Dragoons aren't allowed to kill prisoners. Do what you want. Gerald won’t talk.”

“Well. The thing is, I'm not a dragoon.”

The cocky expression on Gerald's face vanished, “What?”

“I said I'm not a dragoon and I'm sure how long your straps will hold you up.”

Christophaclies' talons were far from hands. They were more vestigial than anything and not quite adapted for grasping and holding. On top of that, they are pretty sharp and the leather straps were starting to slowly cleave. The man was still obstinate though. Even now he wasn't willing to say anything. I wasn't sure exactly what to say. Was this man more afraid of living than dying now that he had failed? While I pondered I spotted something colorful sticking out from behind his torn pants. Without hesitation, I quickly reached out and plucked it away despite his protests. I held it up to the sunlight and saw a blue boar on an orange background by some oak tree colored a vibrant green and brown. I remember seeing it from somewhere before.

I fished around my pockets and produced another insignia that I had hiding in there for some time. It was an identical seal. Both perfect carbon copies of one another.

“So, I guess you're working for the one with this heraldry?”

Gerald didn't say a thing, that was enough for me.

“I think you can pull him back now.”

Christophaclies gave me an odd look.

“You think it's justice dropping a broken man off the edge of a cliff like that?”

She mulled over what I said for a second. Then pulled him back. As she was throwing him backward the straps snapped not a moment too soon. Any longer or any sudden movement and the bandit boss would have had his next sudden rendezvous with the valley floor. Not that he was any threat. Several of his joints seemed dislocated and his limbs bending at inappropriate and unnatural angles. I don't think he was a threat to anyone right now. If he didn't heal right, he may not be a threat to anyone ever again.

“The evil doer has not revealed the name of his master yet.” She chided.

“He doesn't have to,” I said. “Look at these two insignias. I found one at the other fort you burned down. It's certainly a nobleman who financing and backing these guys. These being in the hands of these creeps proves it.”

“A boar. There is no such noble house in all Domdracveria that has a boar on it.”

“No. Not right now.... I got a hunch though. A pretty good one. Right now, I think we need to get out of here before the bandits regroup and fetch their boss.”

“Hmmm... I suppose enough justice has been served today... One moment if you please, Laven.”

Having been looking back and forth, the wyvern walked up to a large boulder by the edge of the cliff and peered over the edge. Throwing all her weight at it she began to push it and slowly roll it till it was moved from its resting point. Falling off the edge I stood at her side and watched with her as the stone fell over the edge and collide with the stone ledge beneath that served as a path up toward the top of the fort.

“There. Now no one will run so easily this time.” She said confidently with her wings resting on her hips, her chest puffed out with pride at her own clever idea.

I suppose that might help. I'm not sure anything these bandits

have to say about what happened will have on the events that have been set in motion, but every bit helps.

“Now, let us return to the Drake Cave!” She said definitively.

Before I could get another word in edgewise or prepare myself I felt a torrent of wind beside me then the powerful vice like grip of her talons against my shoulders as she pulled me over the edge and we dove off the edge of the cliff, only to pick up enough speed to swoop back upwards and fly off into the distance leaving the smoldering fort behind us. I wasn't getting used to the G-forces and the wind and cold stinging my face... What I didn't mind was the time we were saving compared to anyone who had to walk through these mountains and valleys. I was sure there was something in motion and it was going to start soon. Time was a precious ally right now and we'd have to make use of it if what I feared was true.

Chapter 42

With good fortune, the mountains and hills below came and went in rapid succession, even as the droplets of rain stung like needles as the winds blew past. A distant spark of lightning and the roar of thunder illuminated a night plagued with black storm clouds, but as Christophaclies and I soared through the skies there was comfort that it would be nigh impossible that either of us would be seen. I had long since grown accustomed to the feeling of my legs dangling in the air. My animal instincts must have grown tired of perpetuating a constant feeling of vertigo and terror due to being suspended a kilometer in the air by only my shoulders. Only this time I had padded them well to prevent bruising as the wyvern's talons held on firmly and carried me along. For several hours, we had flown south. South beyond Ifern and even past the mighty mountains of the Wyrmbacks which rested eternally behind us. Before us were the foothills of Verdantia, a Duchy of Domdracveria, the stalwart gatekeeper of the south.

I heard the whole lecture from Christophaclies as we flew. You could say it was my inflight movie and she went on at length that it is always through these hills that enemies in times past have tried to invade the kingdom. Having crossed from Vilmheim and seen the sheer and steep cliffs across the Marru River, I couldn't blame them for not trying to march and army that way. I would wager it would be impossible if you couldn't fly. If you could fly, you'd need to fly better than the dragoons and that too seems like a tall order. Christophaclies seized that opportunity to segue into talking about those mighty dragoons of old.

The night was impenetrable, but at last I heard Christophaclies yell above me, “Tulrich Castle ahead!”

Tulrich Castle, the seat of power in Verdantia and that's where we would find its master, Prince Deron. It had been a hard sell, but I had finally convinced Christophaclies several hours earlier that our lead from Gerald pointed us here. I had my suspicions before, but after finding two of those boar insignias there was no doubt in my mind. The wyvern was obstinate, but when I mentioned the Free Brewer's probable involvement she jumped up and was ready to set off at once. I don't fully understand her thought process, but I did feel bad about it. This girl has been with the Princess for almost two decades and Deron must be like a brother-in-law to her. If I'm correct in my deductions... This won't be easy.

The castle itself stood tall, high up on the face of a lone mountain. For miles around were only the rolling foothills of The Wyrmbacks. I'm sure the only way into that mountain was the highway leading into its base, where a large town built around it; far below the castle itself. Tulrich stuck out like an extension of the mountain, at least five hundred meters above the ground. If you couldn't attack this place from the air, I don't see how you could take it. I imagine the only way to regularly would be up through tunnels that crisscross the mountain's insides. This was the gateway to Domdracveria and it looked impregnable. Luckily, we didn't need to knock.

Two quick circles around the upper ramparts we glided and soon after touched down on the upper walls of the castle. I touched down once again like a paratrooper only to feel a sudden weight fall on my shoulders that almost caused my two point landing to become a face plant. I felt myself pulling back in sync with the sound of beating wings and I struggled but managed to stay upright as a pair of legs dangled from my shoulders the feeling of warm flesh on the back of my neck dripping with fresh rain.

"Hey!" I shouted a little too loud. "What's the big idea?"

Probably a good thing the rain and thunder was so loud.

"I'm tired~" Christophaclies moaned.

She kicked her legs playfully and I could feel her sharp talons at the end of her forearms resting gently on my head. She probably believes she weighs less than she does. I couldn't take another step and it took all my strength just to stand there in the pouring rain with my legs shaking. Was this one of those times it was appropriate to tell a girl she was too heavy? …No, not with those talons on my head. She seems the childish sort, but I won't risk it.

"Hey, watch it, I'm gonna slip."

"Hurry then, we shall infiltrate and catch the Brewers by surprise!" Next, I felt her talons lift from my head only to be replaced by a pair of breasts squishing against the top of my head as her head hang upside down as she leaned forward to look right at me. "Or maybe you'd rather carry me?"

Okay okay okay. I get it. You're tired after carrying me for so many hours. I get it already. For someone so seemingly eternally cheerful you certainly are passive aggressive.

I sighed and started walking, exerting a lot of effort to do so, but

eventually got out of rain and into the stone hallways. That was exactly what they were too, it was a stark contrast to the interior of the castle in Ifern. The décor here was far more utilitarian. There wasn't the fancy red carpets or artwork, instead there were dark corridors that weren't even lit. Luckily, I was lugging a living lighter with me and as soon as she hopped off my shoulders and decided to start walking on her own she blew a small jet of flame onto one of the torches hanging on the wall. I'm not sure how good her night eyes were, but it was still a considerate and thoughtful gesture from the head in the clouds warrior of justice. Maybe she actually needed moon and starlight? Either way, she took the lead and began her exaggerated marching as we delved deeper into the castle. Her tail swishing back and forth behind her with glee which I thought betrayed the danger and gravity of this whole mission.

“Be careful of their foul traps, Laven.” She whispered back to me. “One tripped gas trap, one small familiar to spot our approach. One trick or ruse and they may flee.”

It finally struck me that I hadn't the foggiest idea who exactly these Free Brewers were. Some shadowy cabal for certain, but what got this girl so worked up about them was still beyond me. I personally was more worried about a wander guard. Especially since we managed to infiltrate the castle so easily. If it hadn't been so stormy our and the hour so late, I might write this off as a bonified trap.

“And how exactly would they manage any of that?” I had to ask.

“Rituals, potions and recipes of dire evil. Their specialties.”

“Wait, hold on, that doesn't sound anything like a bunch of brewers.”

Christophaclies looked back at me, her head tilting to the side in confusion, “Is that not what alchemists do?”

“Alchemists? You said they were brewers.”

“Potion brewers. Working from the shadows. Adding their sinister concoctions and serving it to the world amidst all the good people enjoying the meals of life.”

And here come the whacky analogies. And I guess was under the wrong impression all along too. A shadowy conspiracy run by a bunch of alchemists somehow sounded more plausible than a bunch

of guys standing around brewing beer. The way she spoke of their world spanning evil shadow empire made me think of the Illuminati or something like that.

As we infiltrated further into the castle we met no resistance. I became increasingly worried because the only sounds were the crackling flame of the torch, our footsteps and the sound of rain and thunder outside that drowned the previous two out. Christophaclies didn't seem worried at all, but knowing I had better common sense meant I couldn't seek any comfort in her confident swagger. We did both stopped abruptly when at last we heard a voice muffled in the distance. It was also getting closer. It came from below and was traveling at a walking pace. Following the voice was another distant torch; without having to be told I blew out our own torch. Three stories below us, walking among the columns of what looked like a meeting hall were three figures.

“I have cleared the troops from this tower Professor. I do hope what you have to show me tonight at such an ungodly hour is worth my time.”

That voice without a doubt belonged to Deron.

“You did demand in our contract that my involvement here was to be secret, Prince. This experiment is larger than the others. Possible witnesses and misunderstandings would occur if these measures were not taken.”

The other voice, 'Professor', was someone I had not met before. His head was completely bald, his limbs gangly and his gait was rather odd as he seemed to have a noticeable slouch. His manner of speech was also jarringly monotonous and slow. His voice matched his face which was very plain and devoid of any emotion. It was as though nothing in the world amused or impressed him. He didn't even have defining features. Anyone would probably forget what he looked like after a few hours and be unable to describe it. He wore unflattering and peasant like flaxen pants and shirt with a pair of shabby sandals but above that all was a long, pure white and glistening lab coat.

Following behind the Professor was a girl, a peculiar one at that. Her skin didn't seem to be uniform. Stitches crisscrossed her body which made her look like she was strung together. Two large bolts stuck out from the top of her head like rabbits ears. Her short hair was gradient and colored like rotten fruit. She walked with like a zombie but with purpose and direction. As she passed underneath I

got a better look at here and she looked pretty much like some sort of Frankenstein monster. Despite all that sewing which was jarringly uncanny, the shape and contours of her face were much like all other monsters I had seen before: It was somehow cute.

“Must you bring that... Abomination with you, Professor?” Deron snarled in disgust when he noticed the limping figure following the two of them.

“I must apologize if my assistant Patches offends you my lord, but her aid is required due to the hazardous reagents used in this experiment.” The Professor calmly spoke in defense of the girl.

All the while the girl didn't seem to take it personally, rather she had a stupid smile on her face the whole time as though she was taking it in stride. I then noticed on her right side, the one I couldn't see before until they walked past that she was lugging some sort of container. Her right arm for some reason was also noticeably longer.

“Come Laven, let's go. The Prince may be in danger!” Christophaclies said while wrapping one wing under my arm and suddenly pulling me along.

I was going to say something about how absurd that is despite everything we're both seeing and hearing, but I didn't get that chance as she pulled me along as she maintained hot pursuit. Christophaclies didn't seem to care she was lugging extra baggage when she leaped with ease on those powerful legs from one ledge to another along the walls and windows. Even though a lot of them were soaked with rain pouring in from the outside she didn't slip once. I have to say I am impressed. Her jumps became more and more daring and I had to try my best to follow her, least I weigh her down and we go crashing to the first floor. Finally, our platforming speed run took us to the far wall of the chamber, right where the three of them were preparing to pass through a solid and thoroughly locked door.

That did not stop Christophaclies though. I think she said something along the lines of, “Hold on” which I did without thinking for my own wellbeing and the next moment we had leapt out of an adjacent window. Far above us a tower stretched into the heavens where lightning streaked across the sky like a really bad omen. A humongous tower half in the mountain, half reaching out for the sky. Punching the wall with her forearm talons and using her clawed feet like ice picks, she dug them into the stone with ease and began pulling the two of us up the side of the tower. I could only clutch on tight around her waist as her tail wrapped the best it could around me and

hold on tight. Much quicker than I thought she could, she had demonstrated once again a great deal of strength and brought us up near the top of the tower. At last we came to a series of windows where I was at last able to grab onto a sill and pull myself up with my own power. We then dropped down into a very dark room, the flashes of light from outside only lighting up parts of the room for very short instances. All I could tell was that the room was littered with so much stuff that it would be a bad idea to wander unless you wanted to trip on something or knock another thing down. That was saying something, because this room was gigantic. It must be because half of it is actually dug into the mountain. Where the windows cease to be a clear indication of this.

Not a moment too soon the sound of locks being undone echoed from a nearby wall as the main door into this room swung open and along with it a cascade of indigo colored flames erupted from oil lamps lining the walls of the room. The wyvern and I ducked behind some boxes and barrels as the three figures ambled into the room and down toward the opposite end about one hundred meters away. With fresh light, the two of us followed them deeper into the room. At that far all is a series of contraptions, flasks, switches coils and other archaic laboratory paraphernalia, all of which was surrounding a massive empty suit of armor that stood seven meters tall while being suspended from the ceiling by cables. Strewn about the room where other unused laboratory tools and lining the one walkway towards the one workable station in the whole room were a series of regular sized suits of armor.

Deron sounded unimpressed when he finally spoke after studying the large suit of armor, “Is this what you wished to show me, Professor? My time is precious. I have but a few final preparations to make.”

“My prince,” The professor replied. “This is the shell of the Mk.V. The commander variant you requested.”

“An incomplete one.” Deron retorted sounding very irritated.

“Only missing one key ingredient, My Prince.” The professor turned slowly to the monster behind him and finally addressed her directly, “Patches, please secure the core.”

“Right away Mister Vee!” Patches shouted cheerily with a salute.

As she slipped through the two with a skip in her step the

Professor waved his hand for Deron to follow him to a safe distance from the suit of armor.

“Preparations-” Patches began yelling out, only for her voice to suddenly change from the chipper and high pitched one to a sullen and depressed one- “almost ready, or something... Whatever.”

“Have her hurry.” Deron spat.

“Patience please, my lord. This installation is more perilous than others, but you did demand to be present for it.” Professor Vee said.

“Because you required such an exuberant fee for it. Do you think my coffers are endless? I need to make sure this isn't some pet project of yours like that disgusting woman you call an assistant.”

“You're right...” Sighed Patches. “I will go end my pointless life immediately-” Suddenly Patches voice became fiery and ornery pointing her finger accusingly at Deron, “Hey! Watch your tongue you bottom feeding-”

“Patches.” Professor Vee said raising the volume in some kind of rebuke even though his monotone was still present.

“Huuuh? What did you just say to-” A visible tic pulled the corner of Patches' mouth like it had been tugged by a fishing line and her voice returned to her its original bright and chipper tone, “Yes, Professor Vee! Installing now!”

Patches opened the case and revealed within a simple black orb. It was about size of an apple, but after being exposed to the air for only a few seconds it appeared to come to life. From the perfectly smooth surface like glass tendrils grew and began swirling around. They lashed out about a meter away, coiling around everything it touched except for Patches, which it appeared to ignore. As far away as I was, I could see beads of sweet form on top of Professor's Vee's head and that had me worried as well for some reason.

“What the hell is that?” Deron demanded, a mixture of anger, shock and disgust dripping from his voice.

“That, my Prince, would be a core of demonic energy.”

“Demonic energy? What is the meaning of this, Vee?”

Deron was visibly upset and almost looked ready to draw his sword at the professor, but Vee simply continued to explain without any care to the danger he was in.

“As I have said before, all my experiments here have included demonic energy. You know this well, my prince. You did agree to it in our contract after all.”

“And I have never before seen it act like that, Vee.”

“To be expected. When enough free demonic energy assembles, it gains sentience. Much like this core I have obtained through my associates at great cost. You see, I do not possess the necessary equipment here to assemble so much energy in one place on my own. A core of this size has no more awareness than that of a jellyfish, but it is still remarkable to witness.”

As excited as he seemed, it certainly didn't show on his face.

“I have even read papers written by my peers about spheres of demonic energy the size of a person. At such a size, not only do they gain sentience but sapience as well. There are claims that one could transform an entire countryside into a demon realm on its own. Truly remarkable.”

“Truly frightening,” Deron rebuked. “Why would you desire such a thing? Does your madness know no bounds? What is to prevent it from growing into such a thing?”

“Simple, my prince. The larger a demonic energy core grows; the more energy is needed so that it may further expand in size. This sphere is the largest we are currently able to produce artificially by siphoning demonic energy from the air. We cannot grow it any larger and it has yet to reach a threshold where it can expand on its own. Only the most vile and saturated demon realms are capable of doing that. This core is perfectly stable. You need not worry, my prince.” Vee's voice then turned very dark and serious for a moment, “I would suggest you do not let it touch you. I have brought Patches along for that purpose. Direct exposure will cause it to defuse into the first person it touches. Such an injection of pure demonic energy would have... consequences. At this size, that person would be consumed by an unmanageable lust. Women would most likely transform into lesser succubi within a minute. Men risk transformation into lesser incubi.”

Deron spat on the floor as though Professor's Vee lecture had left a bad taste in his mouth and the professor didn't seem to be

offended at the mess he was leaving behind.

“Will it work?” Deron asked.

“Most certainly. With this much demonic energy I will have created the most powerful war golem yet. It will be stronger, faster and smarter than the others. A seventy percent increase from the Mk.IV lieutenant class and a two hundred percent increase in the Mk.III soldier class.”

“And the cross contamination risk?”

“Unknown, my prince. I suspect no greater than in other models.”

Cross contamination? What the hell is Deron talking about?

“A five week life expectancy is not acceptable for such a costly unit, Professor. You told me that you would be able to address the problem.”

“That is proving more difficult than I anticipated. However, it is to be expected when using demonic energy.”

“I care not. I only care that it will make me victorious. I will seize the throne and defeat any and all adversaries. These golems will do just that. I will show they are more reliable, stronger and replaceable than those damnable dragoons and their wyverns. Those old fools. Clinging to their traditions. The world is changing. I can feel it. I won’t allow Domdracveria to be unprepared.”

“As you say, my prince,” Professor Vee said as he gave a bow in deference to Deron.

For the first time since we went to radio silence, I stole a glance at Christophaclies beside me who had also been watching in rapt attention. Her face had a... complex look to it. I wasn't able to define it. It wasn't a face indicative of someone who was having insults thrown her way and they were rolling off her back like water off a duck's. This was all beyond even my wildest imagination, but as I thought, we were baring witness to what I feared was the reality of the situation. I think Christophaclies was caught somewhere between denial and acceptance. It wasn't a pretty thing to watch.

“So I ask again, Vee. Are you not able to lower the risk of cross contamination?”

“I believe we still have enough men in reserve to-”

“Do not change the subject! My men are not as disposable as you wish. Every instance is another wasted lump of metal and a human being. My subjects. My future subjects!”

“If you simply allowed the golems to facilitate pairings, you would have an army of them five times the-”

“Absolutely not!” Deron Screamed slamming his fist onto a nearby table, tipping over and smashing several pieces of glass. “My Domdracveria will be a different place. We won’t need to fear the Church, our neighbors nor the Demon Lord. You said mastery of these, 'things', was inevitable! Well?!”

“Inevitable? Yes. If humanity wishes to not only survive but thrive. You see, Prince... Demonic energy is a strange phenomenon. A rather recent one at that. It ignores the laws of nature yet has melded with it so seamlessly. Fire, water, wind, earth... combustibility, volatility, stability... demonic energy. It can change the forms of living things, give off more energy than it takes in and affect not only body but mind and even spirit. The most homely of nuns into the most alluring demonic vixen. The most noble and just of men into a sinner among sinners. However, I believe the Church is misguided in thinking it can purge the world of this force. I do not believe it is in itself evil. Merely that it follows the orders of the demon lord. An extension of her will. But that will is neither omnipotent nor all powerful. That is where we the Order of Ouroboros strive to master it. To call it demonic energy is just a euphemism. It is the stuff of the abyss. That which is not light. We gaze into the abyss each and every day. It is everywhere. From the moment you wake in the morning to when you close your eyes at night. You gaze into it and it gazes into you. To ignore it, is to shiver in the cold and neglect building a fire. Ignore the winds and streams and neglect to build mills and ignore the riches beneath the soil if you would only strike it. A source of energy capable of anything. That the Demon Lord would be the only one to have it do what she desires, it is unfair. That is why we will also learn its secrets and bend it to our will. We will be free men. In our laboratories, we will brew our own futures.”

I slowly looked over at Christophaclies who had also turned to look at me, her eyes glistening and sparkling bright. There was no way that face said anything else other than, 'see? I told you' and was very excited about it in general. Okay, yes. You ended up being half right. Somehow. But that's only half of the story. I fear what we hear next will be the worst of it.

“I know very well your motivations,” Deron calmly replied. “My support and financing of your experiments in exchange for your assistance in claiming this kingdom which is rightfully mine.”

And. Here. We. Go.

“You promised me an army to do just that. And-”

“Prince Deron!” Christophaclies shouted desperately, interrupting Deron as she stood up from behind our hiding place.

Oh god no. Why the hell would you-? Why didn't I think she would be crazy enough to do this kind of thing? When I gathered up the courage to look up, the three of them certainly heard her and they certainly see her as well. Vee's face was unchanged despite everything. Patches had the usual dumb and happy look on her face, she had turned around to see what the fuss was about, swirling mass of demonic energy still in hand. Deron's face was initially surprise, but when he realized where the voice and come from, and if I had to guess from who, it twisted into rage. It was then that I decided the jig was up so I stood up as well, which didn't do much to help the Prince's blood pressure.

“You as well?” Deron spat. “How the hell did you-?”

Now was the time to attack.

“It was rather easy, Deron.” I said as I walked out from behind the barrels and crates, maneuvered over the assorted garbage and debris to step onto the pathway leading to where they were standing. “Or I guess I should say: 'it was rather easy, piggy.'”

As I threw my taunt out, I pulled the two insignias from my pocket and held them up for Deron to see. His eyebrows furrowed immediately, but he did not say anything to refute it. He did visibly wince after being called 'piggy' though.

“A boar though. Slightly more noble than a pig. But I have to say, I'm disappointed you weren't more clever about it.”

Deron started laughing. It was quiet at first, but it grew and grew like a snowball rolling down a hill till he had broken laughing in wild laughter. Even Vee's eyebrow raised a little at the uncharacteristic display from Deron.

“Clever about what? Might I ask? Laven~!” He said, spitting out my name, long and exaggerated.

“Hiring mercenaries. Letting them into the kingdom through the south. Telling them about the various old and abandoned forts surrounding the capital. Paying them to raid anything trying to get into Ifern. Why? To choke it for the inevitable invasion. Although you hoped you didn't have to. You would have preferred to take the crown legally by discrediting your sister. There would no way to dislodge those bandits unless the dragoons were sent. Which is illegal. You'd use that as an excuse. If they sent the army, they'd lose hundreds of men doing so. You could invade just as easily against a weakened force. If they did nothing, they'd starve eventually, and a quick and uneventful siege would be good enough. What you're doing here though... This is... Unexpected.”

“And you, Laven,” Deron said, a wicked and demented smile forming on his lips. “The Thorn Knight and that bitch weren't enough? Now you work with Chris. That monster.”

“Deron...” Christophaclies said, her voice sounding incredibly pained. She vaulted the same mess and joined me before taking a few more steps toward Deron. “My Prince. Tell me this is all just-”

“STAY BACK!” Deron screamed reaching for his sword. “Get back you monster. How dare you show yourself in front of me again!”

Christophaclies retreated backward in shock. She flinched and her wings reflexively drew back and covered her chest, over her heart to be specific.

Deron did not relent, “Or do you still not get it, Chris? You stupid twit? Do you still not realize you ruined EVERYTHING! Have you forgotten such a simple thing?”

Deron pulled down the collar of his shirt, ripping it in the process, but revealing underneath a huge scar, three faded and jagged lines from right shoulder to his left hip. It was a gruesome sight of a wound that grew up with him and never healed.

“Chris...” His voice dripped with venom. “Because of you I was shamed. I was branded a weakling and a coward. Even though I was to be king and my sister was still only a babe I was stripped of my divine right. Just five minutes with you and your foolishness ruined everything! You dare stand before me now after all these years?!”

“Prince I-”

“Silence! Say nothing more. Know that your sins don't end there. Your childishness... Your fantastical delusions and coddling of my sister. She has grown up a weakling. Hero of justice you claim to be? You simply spoiled my sister. You fought her battles for her You thought you were protecting her? If she was to be Queen, then so be it, but a weakling who lets her ministers, those fat, bald and ugly short sighted fools rule for her? I will not accept that. They'll bring this kingdom to ruin. And you made it all possible!”

Deron was having a meltdown. His accusations were wild and fast paced. I had no idea about the history behind them, but every word was like a dagger to Christophaclies' heart. Or should I say, 'Chris' heart?' Because right now I wasn't seeing Christophaclies, warrior of justice. I could see tears welling up under those golden eyes of hers. Streaks of water cascading over the white skin of her face and over the green scales from her draconian ears covering part of her cheeks.

“My Prince, you do not understand. The princess-”

“You're a failure, Chris. You haven't protected anything. You haven't saved anything. Your justice only breaks everything you try to grasp in those clumsy ugly 'hands' of yours.” Deron let out a chuckle. “This is actually really therapeutic. I've always wanted to say these things straight to your face. I suppose others knew better and kept you away from me for all these years. I wonder if that was for my sake. Or yours.”

I couldn't stand it anymore. I stepped forward and moved in front of Chris to shield her.

“Deron! You've gone too far.” I growled. “You're caught. Let it go. Give up. We've seen everything and heard everything.”

“Ha ha ha!” He laughed hysterically. “Caught? Hardly. You've only caught what you thought was a cat's tail and merely angered the tiger it belongs to. You see... I did have an army built. One to supplement my own. Just like the dragoons add to Domdracveria. It's already been completed and it has already marched.”

“W-what?” I stuttered.

“When I visited the capital not so long ago. My army left the

day after I did. It besieges the capital even now. When I arrive, I will lead the decisive blow and lead the charge into the citadel. I will storm the Throne Room and at last put an end to this farce once and for all!"

That's impossible. Fucking impossible. There's simply no way he could have... There's no way we could have missed... Except we flew around Ifern and never did return... No. no no no no...

"My prince, are we finished here?" Professor Vee spoke in his usual monotone. "The preparations here are complete. The core is ready."

"Do it, Professor."

"Hold it right fucking there!" I screamed. "Come on Christophaclies, we got to-"

I ran a few steps forward and then stopped. Christophaclies was unresponsive. Her eyes were empty and dull, and tears were streaming down her face. It was as if her soul had been sucked right out. Her heart shattered to pieces.

"Yup yup!" Patches called out cheerfully above the hubbub. "Core's good and ready~ Now!"

Whatever she had been doing this entire time came to its conclusion. She shoved her hand inside the chest of the giant sized suit of armor. The apple sized black orb squirming with tendrils locked in place on the left side of the chest, right where a heart should go. At the same time, a flash and crack of lightning from above boomed and a surge of electricity through many wires and coils in the room fed into the hulking mass of iron. Patches was blown off her ladder and gave a yelp of surprise. Deron laughed and Vee smiled as he watched his hard work come to fruition as the golem began to move.

The cables holding the suit of the armor to the ceiling were slowly pulled free, the spikes to which they were tied to and embedded into the stone coming along with them, clanging and echoing ominously against the granite floor. The groan of metal echoed throughout the room as the various plates of the giant armored suit rubbed against one another. A red gleaming light from the visor came alive with a buzz that signaled that the mass of metal had come to life. Just as quickly, that orb of red light behind that visor split into two, like a pair of eyes. The creaking and groaning of metal continued as it warped and changed before my very eyes. Plates shifted and melted together, from these gaps white flesh took its place, all showing in

suggestive places. The cumbersome and bulky legs and arms, transformed into slender and curvy limbs. The chest plate bulged into two half spherical mounds and the helmet and visor twisted to reveal behind it a face. A female face, but with red eyes and a dead emotionless and soulless expression. The hulking suit of armor had transformed into a monster girl. A golem. An iron golem.

Deron now issued his last commands. “Golem. Destroy those two. Crush them, break them, let there be nothing left but powder and let it scatter in the winds! Vee! An exit.”

“Patches.” Vee said still in his monotone even after everything.

Patches sighed, her voice gloomy once more, “Yeah, whatever. Transmission for three. Who cares?”

Patches flipped a switch on the wall and the same electricity still coursing through the coils around the room surged around Vee and Deron who had calmly stood beside him. After flipping a second switch Patches dragged her feet and joined them. A bolt of lightning later and all that was left behind after a flash of light was a ring of fire where the three had stood before. After the second switch, the tower shook. The ceiling collapsed behind us. The mountain had collapsed as though to seal in whatever experiment had run amok inside. Our escape was blocked. The sound of thunder and rain outside became very faint. Fainter than the sound of metal grinding as the hulking mass, taller than three men together lumbered across the room toward us.

Chapter 43

With each step, the massive living suit of armor sent nearby debris jumping up into the air. The massive pile of iron had been fashioned into a giant woman, like Talos, but more woman than just one vein. It stomped relentlessly over and through the laboratory and all the equipment and boxes and barrels strewn across the room. Each footstep cracking the stone underneath it as the wood and glass splintered and shattered nearby with each near deafening footstep. Her head, shaped like a sallet with glowing red eyes shining behind the visor locked onto Christophaclies and I. Those eyes told me all I needed to know, she intended to complete her first order: Destroying the both of us.

I took a few steps back, but I remembered our escape had been blocked off by the piles of stone that had caved in behind us. The wyvern herself hadn't moved at all, she was still, her eyes dull and lifeless, tears drying on her cheeks. As the golem approached closer she still hadn't moved. I had to dive and tackle her from the side and push her out of the way as that golem's iron fist raised high into the air and came down with a mighty crash where she had been standing just a second ago.

The golem's fist hit the ground like an explosion, rocks shot in every direction like bullets and dust erupted into the air like ash from a volcano. Slowly, steadily, the golem lifted her unscratched fist from the crater she had created. As the dust cloud settled, she observed that crater was empty. Then those red eyes of hers scanned the room and her head pivoted on her neck with a grating groan of steel against steel. Her unblinking red eyes on the hunt to reacquire her target.

As pebbles rained down on my back I found myself laying on top of Christophaclies back. She still wasn't responding to any stimuli. Deron must have done quite a number on her psyche. She was like the Princess' big sister, right? If that's so, then Deron must have always been like a big brother to her. Even after being separated after the incident for well over a decade, she still had this image of him. I think I had to bear witness to that persona she built up being shattered in an instant. There must be a large piece of her heart missing right about now. If her hero of justice act for the Princess' sake, for her 'family's' sake, for the kingdom's sake... Then everything she had built herself on had been taken out from under her. One of the people she respected most, cared for and loved told her she was a failure... Worse than a failure, Deron had told her she had always been a burden at best.

While there was still dust in the air, I got off her wrapped one of my arms under her armpit and desperately dragged her across the floor.

“Come on. Get up. Come on, Christophaclies!” I shouted at her lifeless body.

She didn't budge at all, but there was someone who did. I heard the metallic groan her the golem's steely joints grind as it stood back upright and turned to face the two of us. She was looking down and staring me dead in the eyes. She was very close now, so close I could feel her every footstep vibrate through my body. I wasn't sure if I was shaking in fear, or her very movements simply shook the earth. I quickly wrapped one of Christophaclies' wings around my shoulder and lifted her off the floor. I then threw myself forward. Where I had just been standing one of the golem's mighty boots came crashing down and once again exploded against the stone floor like a bomb had gone off. Once more a massive crater was left behind, but this time I could feel the shock wave from the blast as it pushed against my back and sent my flying further than I had expected.

I came crashing down and rolling forward on impact like a log down a hill until my back finally crashed up against a pile of crates filled to the brim with alchemical supplies. I let out a hacking cough as my spine cracked on impact. Christophaclies had been blown somewhere else entirely. There had been no way I could have held onto her after all that. I desperately looked for her and saw her sprawled out on another pile of boxes, knocked down like a boxer in the corner of the ring with her wings tied up and hanging over and above her.

The golem's relentless assault was halted only for a moment. It struggled to pull its boot from the floor, but one mighty yank later it was freed from the rubble. As the dust settled once more her eyes scanned the room and settled onto Christophaclies. The rest of her body turned in the direction her head was and she took her deliberate and heavy steps toward the wyvern's comatose shell. Even if she could survive a blow like that, I don't think she'd be able to take another. That girl was going to get killed.

My breathing became panicked and I was on the verge of hyperventilating. If she was defeated... If she was killed... Then there was no way I could take the golem out. There wasn't even going to be a hope I could escape this place without her. I stood up on shaky legs,

but there was no way I'd ever be able to get to her side fast enough. Even if I did, there was no way I could protect her from that blow. There wasn't even time to pull her out of the way. But what could I do? What could I do? What could I do?

I could do what she can't right now. That's what I can do. My hand slid on top of a box as I got up and my fingers touched against a large hammer. That will do.

As the golem raised its fist and readied itself to bring it crashing down from its apex I jumped forward and hammed it up, shouting in a deep and exaggerated heroic voice, “Stop right there, Iron Golem!”

The golem came to a stop, freezing in place and directed her attention toward me. Lugging the railway sized hammer over my shoulder, straightened my back and raised one boot on top of another box. My body was still trying to shake uncontrollably, but I put on the bravest face I could.

“You'll have to go through me first. Thirteenth Knight of the Realm. Tamerlion!” I thrust forward the head of my hammer toward her and challenged the behemoth. “Iron Golem, your reign of terror ends now, Sir Tamerlion has come for you!”

The golem observed me for a moment, her eyes locked on me, her mouth below the visor remained emotionless as it always been. However, she lowered her fist and her body slowly and deliberately turned toward me. I had succeeded in changing her target. I had mixed feeling about it. More than that, I can't believe it worked. Maybe since I was armed with a weapon, I was a higher priority target?

“That's right, villain.” I spat. “I challenge you. Fight a real knight. If you want to crush the helpless. You'll have to answer to me first!”

Faster than before, she strode toward me and closed the distance fast. The golem's fist was raised high in the air and ready to come down over her should and crush me like a plastic bottle. As soon as the fist came speeding down, I didn't retreat, I surged forward. Behind me the fist came crashing down, the concussive force of the arm's movement through the air almost enough to shred me to pieces. The blow missed though and even the shock wave as it slammed into the ground as I leapt slightly off the ground as the stone beneath my feet buckled and broke as another crater was born. I sailed between

the iron golem's legs and appeared on the other side, her back wide open.

In the confusion and dust that erupted from the blow I raised the hammer high and took aim at the back of her left knee.

As I pivoted on my heel and spun around like I was making a hammer toss, I bellowed, “Thunder of the Lion: Hammer Fall!”

The head of the hammer clashed with the thin armor behind the knee and buckled the joint in one blow. The golem's leg bent forward, and with her right arm still embedded into the floor, her body fell forward and her left hand swung out in reflect to break her fall. Now kneeling,

I ran around back to the front and brought my hammer down again on the golem's head, screaming at the top of my lungs, “Finishing Move: Lion Emperor's Wrath!”

Like a gong, the hammer head collided with the helmet and a metallic ring that echoed off the walls of the room. On the side of the sallet a deep dent had been caved in and the rest of the head turned sharply ninety degrees in the opposite direction. As I pulled back my hammer, the golem's left hand quickly rose from the floor, swung away and then swung back toward me. All of it happened in an instant. All I could do was hold the hammer's shaft in front of my body as the back of her hand, the size of my torso, collided with me and threw me across the room like a swatted fly. I was still soaring through the air and wondering what the hell had happened. Next, I felt gravity take its hold on my and slam me back down to the ground. Hitting the ground wasn't enough though, I carried on and plowed through crate after crate, through table and chair until I came to a skidding stop just before I collided with a wall.

In my hands, I was holding two pieces of the hammer. In my right, the head and in my left the rest of the shaft. I was left in a complete daze, I couldn't even pull myself to my feet. All I could do was watch the world spin around me. When I finally came back to my senses, I hurt everywhere. Not the blinding pain I had felt before, but I still couldn't pull myself back to my feet. Then I felt the earth shake once again. Each rumble in a rhythm like footsteps. A shadow cast itself over me and soon I felt a cold and strong force wrap itself around my torso. As I was lifted into the air the crushing pressure against my shoulders caused my hands to seize and the hammer pieces to fall to the floor.

When I looked up, I saw myself looking at the golem. With her free hand, she grabbed hold of the top of her head and with a sickening sound of metal tearing against metal, she forced her head back straight. Her visor was partly bent in on one side, but I could still see one of her glowing red eyes beyond it. Her emotionless lips below it now twisted into a frown. A scowling frown. Her free hand then wrapped around her other hand and the two of them began squeezing tighter and tighter. I couldn't help but let out a scream as I heard the bones and joints in my body slowly snap, crack and pop under the pressure. My legs helplessly kicked below me, hitting nothing but air. Soon enough I couldn't scream anymore. If I screamed, then I would empty my lungs and I wouldn't be able to take another breath deep enough to keep on going. I grit my teeth as the golem slowly and maliciously tightened her grip. I'm sure she could end it in a moment if she wanted to, but I suppose she was savoring this as revenge from before.

Lifted off the ground, helpless and being crushed I grit my teeth as I was failing to bear with the pain. A mere human like me didn't have the strength to do a thing. In my last moments, I found myself screaming out against my will.

“Chris!” I cried out from the bottom of my heart.

With that the crushing pressure held my chest tighter and I couldn't suck in another bit of air. Unable to breathe I could feel my consciousness fading and I knew I wouldn't wake up after I had passed out for the last time. As the world started turning black at the edges of my visions and my vision starting to go dead, I heard something at the edge of my hearing.

“Justice!”

Is that...?

I sluggishly turned my head toward the sound, as did the golem. Floating in the air, no, it was just that time seemed to have come to a standstill, the wyvern was swooping down with on leg up high.

“Kick!”

A beautifully executed axe kick. A kick with razor sharp talons attached to the end of that dragon-like leg. Like a knife through butter, three talons tore into the bicep of the iron golem. Each talon cutting

deep, deep enough to the bone, if she had bone. A new sound louder than my creaking bones rang out in the room, metal twisting and rending. The overwhelming pressure from two hands was cut in half as her left hand went limp and the rest of the arm sagged down and hung loosely, swaying like a pendulum. Chris kicked off the golem's arm, somersaulting forward and bicycle kicking as she soared though the air, but her second strike fell short of the golem's other arm as it was now aware and trying to dodge. Chris tore a gaping hole into the golem's chest instead. A fatal wound for anything else, but the insides of this golem were empty. Not a vital organ could be seen.

Landing a few meters away with a perfect two pointing landing, declaring: “Evil Stand and be Sundered!”

I took a few hacking coughs and sucked fresh air into my lungs, but the golem's grip was still much too tight for me to think about escaping.

“Laven!” Chris shouted up as she rose up and stood tall. “Sorry I'm late.” She said with a grin. “Hold on, I'll free you!”

I had a bad feeling.

“No, hold on. Don't just-”

“Prepare yourself, iron beast!” Chris shouted, crouching down and then leaping into the air.

Beating her wings to project herself forward like a spear toward the golem deftly held my forward in front of Chris' path causing her to brake in midair and come to a full stop right in front of my eyes. Our foreheads almost crashing into one another. From the left came the golem's arm, still hanging by a string, but a string as strong as chain. And like a flail her left hand like a wrecking ball swatted Chris out of the air and sent her flying back toward the ground where she started. This time the ground did not treat her so kindly. She crumpled on the spot, not even able to break her fall, she lay there groaning in pain.

“Chris!” I shouted out in vain.

As the wyvern tried to get back to her feet, the golem swiftly strode forward, pulled back one of her boots and landed it square on Chris' back. She let out a painful shriek as she was thrown across the room before coming back down, a large pile of crates exploding and splintering after breaking her descent.

Still clutching onto me tight, the iron golem began following the trail of destruction Chris had left in her wake. All the while I tried to pull myself free, but it was all in vain. Chris looked down from the count, unable to get back to her feet despite still being conscious. When the golem reached her, I'm sure the next blow would be a fatal one. I desperately looked around, for something, anything I could do. When I looked back at the golem, I found it.

Beyond the hideous gash in the golem's chest, where Chris' three talons had raked across it's breasts and rolled back the steel, I saw something darker than the shadow inside that mount of metal. A pulsating sphere of black, the size of an apple. It beat like a heart, suspended and held in by some type of mechanical contraption. As the golem stood over Chris and raised one of its boots up high to come smashing down on her, I threw caution to the wind.

I squirmed one of my arms loose between the golem's fingers and stretched out with all my might. Each centimeter causing the bone of my arm to grate against the thin space between the golem's fingers. If I kept going, there was a chance my arm might snap. I wasn't sure if I could extend it all the way and if she clenched her fingers tight, she might just sever it off. Ignoring all that, I continued to reach out. My hand passed through the tear in her chest and approached the sphere. The black sphere of demonic energy with tendrils squirming around it as thought it was alive. Hell, it probably was alive if Vee was correct. This thing was the heart of this beast. Without it... Without it, it would surely perish. That is the conclusion I came to.

The golem's boot came to the highest point she could lift it. Below Chris was still unable to move. She hadn't even the chance yet to look up and see her impending doom. As those two actors played out their part, I in the background reached further until my fingers were close enough to graze the orb. A moment later the orb could rest in the palm of my hand, so I did just that. I reached out and snagged hold of it squeezing my fingers around it like the golem was crushing me.

Instantly I felt the heat coming off the orb. It was hot like a rock from a roaring fireplace. It felt like my hand was burning, but I clenched my teeth and bared with it. Then I watched in horror as a thousand tiny tendrils erupt from the sphere and shoot back down on my fore arm, piercing it like a thousand needles. Each sting wasn't hot, but was cold like ice. My arm felt like I had dipped it in liquid nitrogen: A completely different kind of burning that my palm was experiencing.

I wasn't the only one in pain though. The golem froze on the spot. It felt something was wrong, very wrong. It clumsily stumbled

back a few steps and looked down. In a panic, it pulled its hand away from its chest, but it was too late. As I was pulled back, my grip on the sphere of demonic energy didn't break. Two thick tendrils trailed back to the contraption within its chest, still anchoring it in place. The sphere itself was attacking my arm, a cold feeling running up my arm and reaching into my shoulder and starting to wash over across my chest. Despite all the pain, I still held only tightly. However, the invasive cold suddenly stopped and like a wave ebbed back across my body to its source. The needles from the sphere pulled back and instead a thousand spikes shot out from the sphere, giving it the appearance of a sea urchin. Spikes even pieces through my hand but didn't spill a drop of blood. It still stung like hell though, it was colder than cold and the sound it made. A horrid sound. An ethereal screech like a banshee's wail.

Glass that had yet to be broken, shattered. I couldn't cover my ears, but I could swear a wetness in them told me they could very well be bleeding right now. I felt my hand convulse as though the sphere was desperately attempting to break my grasp. The golem itself was losing strength and its knees were buckling as it continued stumbling backward. Finally, the golem came crashing down onto its butt, and sat there paralyzed. The one red glowing eye I could see through its visor wide and shaking. As its grip also slackened and freed my arm enough to give one last good yank as I gave out a yell:

“This is the end, Iron Golem! This is Tamerlion's victory!”

With a sound like tearing flesh the tendrils connecting the sphere of demonic energy to the golem tore free.

I watched as the red glowing eye of the golem slowly turned faint before going white. Afterward the light vanished completely and the golem went limp with one last shake then became as still as a statue. Even the sphere eventually became quiet and with the golem dead I tossed it away onto the ground. It hit the floor with a sick wet thud, the tendrils still squirming and trying to drag the rest of its 'body' across the floor like an octopus after impact. It didn't get very far though, a black mist started to rise from the body and the sphere became smaller and smaller. It gave off one last pathetic and quiet wail as the last bit of it finally turned completely to mist and diffused into the air completely.

The statue didn't last long either. I watched as the body of the golem slowly turned from gray steel to a reddish brown rust. Flakes of rust began falling off bit by bit. Even the clenched fist that was still

holding me up about 4 meters off the ground. The pace of the rust sped up and soon the golem was disintegrating. The arm of the golem soon couldn't hold my weight and the hand itself crumbled apart and I was sent into a free fall toward the ground.

“Laven!” I heard Chris call out below me.

As I turned my head mid drop, I saw Chris running full speed toward my point of impact with her wings outstretched into a cradle. I fell into her outstretched wings, but she didn't catch me completely. My weight bowled her over and we both gave out a yelp of pain and surprise as we both landed into a heap on the floor.

“Laven!” She cried out again. “Laven! That was aweeeeesome!”

In her excitement Chris wrapped her wings around me and pulled me in close, stuffing my face between her breasts as she squirmed and squealed in delight. Next, she pulled me back up and planted a series of kisses on both my cheeks before rubbing her cheeks against my own, giggling all the while.

Well... I suppose that's one problem down. As I looked around the ruined chamber, a few occasional pieces of stone falling from the ceiling from pebbles that had been shotgun blasted into it previously, I knew we were still in a world of trouble. Deron had to be stopped, but we were stuck in here regardless if we were corpses or not.

Chapter 44

'Corpses or not', huh? I'm not sure why I thought of it that way. Given how our situation hadn't improved in the past few hours, I'm not sure why I had ever been that optimistic. Maybe I thought the cave in wasn't so bad? Maybe I thought there had to be another exit somewhere? I'm not sure of the exact number of hours since then, but even the alchemical lights illuminating the inside of this storehouse had begun to slowly die. Lucky for Chris and I, we weren't starving; it was a storeroom after all. Besides all the smashed equipment and dangerous chemicals, there was some preserved food and water. Water that wasn't pure alcohol or acid and food that wasn't poisonous. All of it saved for someone prepared to spend long hours here without having to leave.

That wasn't the worst of it though, the worst was that the cave in was thought out in advance. There wasn't even a draft by the pile of stones. Meaning that not only was nothing getting out, but nothing getting in. The most important of course being fresh air. I've come to peace with asphyxiation and passing out eventually from the carbon dioxide build up rather than painfully dehydrating or starving to death. Those two even ranked above being crushed to death by a giant war golem. Even now that golem was having its last laugh though. Rusting to death in the corner like that. Just how much iron-oxide did create on her death? A pile of red dust and iron flakes still remains where she fell and that can't be good on the lungs either.

That wasn't even the start of all my problems, I had to spend a good twenty minutes or so convincing Chris to stop kicking and tearing at the cave in with her talons. She wasn't getting anywhere and she was just wasting energy and precious oxygen by doing so. If there was any time to be calm, it was now. Even if there was an army marching on the capital consisting in part killer war golems- okay, bad line of thought when trying to stay calm.

Chris' initial abrasive stubbornness lasted about another ten minutes after that. Eventually she slumped down at the debris where she has remained ever since. I suppose her struggle was a welcome diversion from the existential crisis. Her whole raison d'etre has been swept from underneath her like a rug during a practical joke done in poor taste. Although she can fly, she didn't make the landing on cold hard reality well at all. I suppose somewhere deep down inside Deron was always the brother she never had. Considering what I've learned of monster biology, that is a rare if not a nonexistent thing. A real luxury to be sure. The shock of betrayal; there is a sympathy I find myself feeling for her from deep down, where and why... that eludes

me.

Even if we did get out of here, it would have to be soon. Deron had a big head start and his army had an even unfairer one. Except for Rose and Susan and the royal guard, the men defending that castle, as impressive as it was, are not the most stellar examples of soldierhood. Compared to the show of discipline with his own knights, I'm not sure how long they last against them. I'm not even considering the war golems which seal the deal. He wanted a power to rival the wyverns for his new world order? I think he might have got it Then again, what good could just the two of us do? I suppose in the end, I'm just worried about not being of any help to anyone.

While lost in thought, I hadn't noticed the approach of the lonely wyvern who with a thud sat down behind me, tearing me back to reality. I felt her back press up against my own as she laid back and gave out a sigh.

“I messed up big, right?” She asked sorrowfully.

“Would it make you feel better if I didn't take my share of it?” I quipped in return.

She let out a weak little laugh. Either I wasn't as funny as I thought or she was feeling it worse than I thought. I heard the scrape of talon on stone as she tucked her legs close to her body and wrap her wings around her knees. I leaned back myself so that her weight wouldn't snap my spine forward like a twig. There was no way to be sure just how far back she intended to lean if I didn't confirm I was there. The ridiculous strength some of these girls have is starting to get a little troublesome.

Chris let out a long and heavy sigh, the distinct lack of her usual husky and forced heroic inflection was missing. It was troubling to hear it, there was no pleasure to be found in watching and literally feeling someone break down behind you. I'm sure that goes beyond her just breaking character too.

“Look,” I finally said, ready to level with Chris. “I was the one who got us to come here.”

“I climbed the tower. I wanted to talk with Deron again. Just wanted it to all be a misunderstanding.”

“I said I brought us here. I still got you one upped. Besides, I didn't stop you.”

“Maybe I didn't want to be stopped.”

“Maybe I didn't either? What I had been suspecting... I had to see it and hear it myself.” I let out my own sigh, “I guess we both got what we were asking for.”

Not a peep out of her and silence descended once again. Maybe I won the blame game? Then again, maybe the last thing she wanted was for me to see her as anything else other than the headstrong and hotblooded girl she had shown me over the last two days? Maybe I was approaching this the wrong way?

I was dragged out of my train of thought by a soft and gentle ringing. A chiming in the form of a murmur. From the throat of Chris, a humming was filling up the silence of the vast and ransacked room. It started quiet, but it continued to grow. It was clumsy, but like someone gets back on a bike after so long, as though she couldn't truly forget it, she reassembled the melody bit by bit and eventually she quietly sang:

“Twelve are they,
twelve they shall remain.
So that children may play
And their sleep may stay
A peaceful domain

Twelve are they,
Twelve they shall remain.
In ages new, like potter's clay,
men born today,
shall take up their reins.

Twelve are they,
Twelve they shall remain.
Their spirits shall stay,
so children need only pray
for those heroes, evil's bane.”

She may have wings, but I wasn't expecting the singing of an angel. I found myself unable to say a thing as Chris explained.

“A lullaby. My earliest memory. I'm sure it was my mother who sung it.” Her voice became a little graver, “I don't remember her face, but I remember her voice... and the song. So when I met the princess, when I was made her wyvern, I sang it to her every night when she couldn't sleep.”

“A real big sister, huh?”
“I got it right once at least.”

We're talking about Deron, right? If I recall correctly, he suffered a grievous injury playing with Chris when they were kids. Deron never grew out of it. If the fact that all those years later the scar grew with him too wasn't enough.

“You were told not to worry about... the injury you gave him?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“You never met him after that till today?”

“...Yes.”

“So you're saying they carted him off somewhere entirely? You were with the princess after that, right?”

“...Yes.” She said painfully.

“Which means you're now blaming yourself for what Deron has grown up to become?”

“...”

She didn't say a thing. I guess I hit the nail on the head. For someone who has taken on an alter-ego dedicated to fighting evil to have created the most vile villain to stalk this kingdom in generations, I suppose that would do a number that ego.

“Is that all you're worried about?”

“Wha?” She gasped in surprise.

I turned my head around to match her glare with my own. She wasn't angry, at least not yet. She was more bewildered than anything.

“You do realize people make their own choices, right? You can't control everything that happens to you. Sometimes you can't even control what happens as a consequence of what you can control. Take a look at me. Have I told you yet why I'm even here? Not just stuck in this room with you. I'm talking here at all. I went to sleep in my bed one night and woke up having lost pretty much every memory in my head about who I am. Not only that I woke up in what seemed like

another world completely. Lost, afraid, in the most dire of straights. I was upset, I was confused and angry. What I didn't do was dwell on 'why'. Why did this happen to me? That doesn't matter. It might be unfair, but I just have to make the best of it. I decided I was going to make things right again. Find my way back home instead of sit around waiting in the middle of the forest with only my trashed belongings to keep me company."

I turned around and looked forward again.

"Deron... Deron didn't take what happened to him very well. He couldn't be king anymore. Being Prince... Duke, whatever... It wasn't enough for him. That's what everyone said to him too and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. He tried and all he got to show for it is that scar. He shouldn't be king and I might never go home. I suppose in a way we both lost the same thing. While he plotted and built an army to kill his sister for it, I decided to just start walking. I could have done a number of terrible things along the way too, but I didn't."

I scratched the back of my head in embarrassment, I think I was talking a little too much. More than I'm used to.

"Anyways... What I'm trying to say is... that I have no reason to believe you did out of malice. I'm not wrong, am I?"

"...No." She spoke softly. "No. We were playing a game. He said he was going to be the hero and I would play as the monster... He had a wooden sword and was just a weak little kid."

I think the final piece of the puzzle is falling into place.

"And you weren't?" I asked.

"...So we fought. He got angry that I wasn't trying. He swung as hard as he could, but it didn't hurt and said some mean things, so I attacked."

"See? It's not-"

"No! I didn't have to." She shouted, turning around to face me while resting on her knees. "You said we can choose right? I got serious... And he got hurt. He was supposed to be my little brother..."

"Yeah. You probably screwed up there. But don't think he didn't ask for it and got exactly what he wanted. The blame is half his.

At least half. What did he do with it though? Let that bad experience shape him into a bitter and angry man. What did you do?”

She didn't say a thing.

“You became friends with the princess right? Her big sister? Became the hero of justice you always wanted to be, right? I think you're a few steps ahead of the man who went backwards. Turning himself inward and is about to become a tyrannical despot with his army of evil war machines.”

She still didn't say a thing.

“If it means anything to you, I sincerely believe you're not at fault. The amount you've beaten yourself up over it through the years... I don't think anyone blames you, except Deron. Even Rissler told me he thought the little turd deserved it. Deron hasn't got anything but his own little twisted desires. You cause trouble for everyone, sure, I won’t deny that. However, you've got people who actually care about you. That puts you way ahead.”

Still nothing.

“Deron couldn't become the king he wanted. Even if he wins, he still won’t be that king. He couldn't even become the hero he wanted to be. I think it’s safe to say he became the opposite.”

“...If that's what the thirteenth knight says...” Chris mumbled behind me.

I felt Chris' wings hang over my shoulders and close in around my chest. Her breasts pressed up against my upper back as her chin rested on the top of my head.

“...Tamerlion.” She whispered into my ear.

I blushed beat red.

“You were awake for that?” I trembled and asked reservedly.

Chris laughed, broke her embrace and pulled back. I turned around to see her take another absurd pose.

“You'll have to go through me first. Thirteenth Knight of the Realm. Tamerlion!” She said in her usual heroic tone, mocking me.

Oh god, no.

Chris was all smiles again, but she quickly put back on another uncharacteristic blank expression. Once again, she decided to get serious. She had an air about her that told me she intended to say something important.

“I've decided,” Was all she said.

“Decided what?” I inquired.

Pointing on her wings, with talon extended toward me, she declared, “You are more a knight than even I thought. Not one of twelve, you truly are the thirteenth.”

“I still have no idea what that even means.”

“The twelve knights were warriors. Knights of renown. Symbols of justice and the pinnacle of the just. The thirteenth is the lost knight. The forgotten knight. Warriors stride across the battlefield, the thirteenth does not. But who is it that tells the story? It is he that the song springs from. Where the twelve cleave evil in twain with sword and lance, the thirteenth with pen and word. No less brave than the others, yet never is his name sung, the name which has been forgotten. Laven, you bear that name. In your heart.”

She said while pressing her wings up against her left breast with a warm and soft smile.

“That doesn't even begin to explain-”

“That is why!” She shouted over me. “I have decided to challenge you.”

“Now you've lost me.”
“I challenge you to the mounting ritual!”

“Mounting what?”

“Since ages long lost-” She began with theatrics doubled from before. “The covenant dictates that man or dragonkin may declare this challenge. To the victor, goes the loser.”

“Wait... I remember something like this.” I mumbled.

“Should you accept, should you win, then my strength be yours. Should I win, your strength mine.” She suddenly dropped her voice and quietly and quickly said, “Where the dragon would consume

the flesh of the loser.”

Wait. What?

“And to the knight should he triumph, the loyalty and servitude of the dragon. From which I may bring my full power to bear.”

Full power to bear? Are you telling me she's been holding back?

“Full power? You're not telling me you can clear those rocks away?”

“Exactly!”

For fuck's sake...

“Then why not do so before?” I shouted.

“Pride. Tradition. The Rules!” She listed off, one on each talon on her right wing.
Even 'the' was one for some reason...

“The covenant prohibits me from assuming that form selfishly and without having performed the ritual. And each wyvern guards their ritual closely. Such is the pride of the wyvern! Also the spirit of the other is needed to...” She mumbled and trailed off at the end.

“As abrasive and stubborn as always.” I mumbled shaking my head. “Alright. We're gonna die in here if we don't do something anyways. If you think you can break us out in time to help the Princess and the others... Whoa! What the hell are you-?”

When I looked back up Chris was clumsily fiddling with her top. Finally, with one good talon wrapped around the fabric around her neck, the top was undone and fell to the floor. Her bare white and fair breasts bouncing freely from gravity, each settling down firm and well shaped after a few healthy jiggles. Crowning each a small but bright vibrant pink nipple, hard from the cold air wafting from what was left of the cold mountain air. She shook her head and her short shoulder length dull pastel pink hair ruffled and tossed back and forth. Jumping around, switching poses much like she had before, only now her breasts freely swaying with each energetic bounce. I think she is... stretching...

She pointed at me impatiently, “Hurry up. Strip. Or I shall do it for you!”

“You don't mean you've replaced consume with- and mounting you don't mean- You've got to be fucking kidding me.”

She glowered at me, impatient and irritated that I wasn't taking this as seriously as she was. Those talons were enough to convince me and I took the time while I slowly removed my gloves and leather jerkin to talk her down.

“Are you sure we couldn't just play chess instead? Best two of three? I found a board and pieces in the corner a couple hours ago-”

Next, she slipped her talons underneath the strings of her underwear wrapped around her waist, the bottom partly armored with her green scales and affixed with shed talons, the rest of it barely more than swimming wear. She bent over at ninety degrees and pulled it down to her knees and then deftly slipped one leg out at a time. While she bent over and swayed back and forth as she balanced on one talon at a time, I watched with parched throat her large breasts sway freely.

With the underwear wrapped around her right ankle, she gave a flick with that powerful draconic leg of hers and sent it flying past my head. Hard and close enough that I could feel the air disturbed right next to my ear and my hair rustle. Standing tall again, and now naked too, she kept her normal heroic pose, wing talons at her hips, legs shoulder width apart. Now I could see all of though. And I do mean all of her. Bare, unobstructed, her tight folds and little red bead plain as day.

I was fumbling with my belt after undoing the button and zipper on my jeans when my eyes became glued to this new sight instead. Somewhere in the back of my head I was musing about how this sort of thing seems to happen when I spend too much time with any girl over here...

My hesitation wasn't doing me any favors though. The next moment Chris has crouched down, knees bent and wings out straight.

“Long enough! Prepare yourself, Laven!” She shouted and charged.

Even though she was still about a good ten meters away, with just the power of her legs and gliding back down on her wings, she

launched herself at me, talons first. I tried to react, but with my pants around my hips, I tripped and stumbled backwards instead. My fall was caught when her talons wrapped around my shoulders in her usual vice like grip. Although she caught me, she still came barreling into me, pushing me over with her wings slowing the fall. I still landed flat on my back against a pile of blankets spilling out from a broken box, but the rest of her came crushing down on my stomach where her bare buttocks pinned me to the floor.

When I opened my eyes, I was met first with pussy only a scant few centimeters from my face and as I looked up from there to her navel surrounded by taut and firm abdomen to her swaying breasts to finally her blushing red face. Her eyebrows were twitching, as was the corner of her mouth, but she was still maintaining her usual heroic demeanor the best she could.

“The upper hand is mine, Laven!” She declared with a wobbly voice.

She released the grip of her talons off my shoulders and splayed them sideways, which didn't help for much to hide her womanhood. As long as she was sitting on my stomach I couldn't budge. There was a frightening power in those legs that could tear open steel plates like a can opener on a tin lid. She could easily just push down with those legs of hers with knees high up like that. I wrapped my hands around her ankles and tried with all my strength to lift them off, but they wouldn't even budge.

I could hardly concentrate. There was a painful bulging pain in my pants. I had to confess I'm surprised I hadn't noticed earlier. It was very similar to... no, it couldn't be... not at a time like this...

With her wings and talons on her forearms she reached down my waistband of my jeans and gently, carefully, pulled them back while she sat on me. She lifted her weight momentarily when she got them near my knees, but came crashing back down, enough to cause me to gag like a sucker punch to my stomach. Only it was her ass, not a fist, that came crashing back down. By the time I had recovered, she was twirling my pants by the waistband around on of her talons and then let it fly off into the distance.

When I looked down, I saw something else entirely that was almost more shocking than everything else. The painful throbbing from my groin... I was looking down at my boxers, the only shred of clothing I still had on. Sticking out from under the tight elastic waistband was

the head of my penis. The size and girth of it as it laid flat against my stomach reached well past my own navel and caught me off guard. That certainly isn't right. The color is all wrong too, flushed red, far too red. It seemed like it was more like a red balloon ready to burst, the veins throbbing painfully.

I'm sure most guys would like to think it would be a great day to look down and see something like that, but it hurts like hell. It has increased in size unnaturally. As to why... That orb of demonic energy... Was this some sort of residual after effect? It was some sort of mass consisting of evil lust magics. I can't think of anything else that would cause such a phenomenon. Can turn someone into an incubus, Vee had said. I think that's what it tried to do when I grabbed it, but something went wrong. Maybe something went wrong with me too. All said and done, this was a priapism just waiting to happen. I would say this was not in the best interests of my health.

“Given up already, Laven? I know you have more fight in you than that!” Chris said, still trying to look brave and heroic despite how noticeably she was trembling. “Very well! First blood shall be mine!”

Please don't say 'blood' right now.

Wrapping her talons around the elastic waistband of my underwear, she deftly pulled it down to my knees letting my swollen member flop freely against my stomach. Seeing it fully caused Chris to hesitate, her jaw dropping and lost as to what to do. It didn't long for her to regain her composure, to her credit.

Lifting herself back up, she shifted back and came crashing back down. Only this time the folds of her labia were resting over the top of my member. I could feel the slick and ever wetter and soaked folds of her inner walls begin to slide back and forth along my shaft as Chris rocked her hips back and forth. Torn between keeping me pinned and moving back and forth, she bit down on her lower lip as she found a rhythm.

As for myself, there was a strange mixture between pain and pleasure. Like scratching a bug bite, it feels good, but when you stop it hurts worse off than before. Chris seemed to be heading in the opposite direction, her face was embarrassed before, but there was a slowly vexing and erotic expression spreading across her face and her body was becoming less tense and more relaxed. It was as if instincts were taking over and guiding her onwards, closer and closer to true

pleasure.

“Wait... Chris... Stop. Something's wrong.”

“The ritual is started. Ah~ It cannot be stopped.” She said with an erotically husky voice.

“Why would you- ow~ Go this far?”

“It's you. If this can make you mine. Then so be- ah~!”
“Wait. What?”

“We'll find a nice cave somewhere, just the two of us.”

“What about the-?”

“The rules say that if I win, we may never return. A wyvern with a human servant, has no place living among humans. If I can have you though, that's something I'm willing to ah~ live with. Now... Suffer my 'Justice caress!”

That's completely absurd. Had my whole speech backfired to put such a thought in her head? What about the Princess? The kingdom? Stopping Deron? Rose and Susan?

Any hope of another straight thought in my head was blown away when Chris shifted her body forward and a hard nub started grazing against my swollen glans every time her hips rocked back and forth. With each oscillation, she moaned and panted harder than before. I could feel something stir in my loins as well. Muscles in my butt where flexing and getting ready, the throbbing was getting worse and the amount of pain was being drowned out by the pleasure as I was reaching my climax.

Chris' hips were moving on their own now, I'm not sure she had any say down there anymore. Her folds were slick and my dick was a drenched in slick and slimy juices, a mixture of precum and vaginal fluids and sloshed every time she moved her hips up and down the entire length of my shaft.

I clenched my teeth and let out a groan as I was pushed beyond my own limit. There wasn't a snowball's chance in hell I'd be able to keep that dam intact to prevent what was building up behind it from spilling over and bursting through. The erotic moans and panting of Chris as it drifted into my ears compelled my baser instincts and overpowered my sense of reason and as Chris came to her own limit

and came to a halt and climaxed with a long and hearty moan I groaned and let loose. Powerful surge after surge, like waves, coursed from the base to the tip and then back up my spine and into my head where my vision went white. The dam had broke and ejaculation after ejaculation shot out and landed on my stomach and chest. This wasn't any normal amount either. You only saw this kind of money shot in some staged climatic porno scene.

It felt like it went on for a minute, but at last the pain was washed away. What was left was only the afterglow from the pleasure of the act itself. Chris had lost her strength as well and was holding herself up above me by her talons dug into the stone. Not long ago she her swept her legs behind her and she was on all fours mounted above me. With weary and unfocused eyes, she looked down at me and I back up at her. Her gold reptile eyes traced over my chest where she spotted my spent load, the thick smell causing her nostrils to twitch. Whether on purpose or instinct she leaned down and without hesitation traced her tongue up, down and around my chest and stomach. She lapped up every trace of semen there and swallowed it all mouthful by mouthful as her own mouth filled to the brim with saliva as though watering and savoring the flavor. Afterward she sat back up on her knees, her ass pressing up against my stomach. With a talon, she wiped some that had not reached her mouth and licked the talon clean with a dazed erotic expression.

“Fu fu fu~ Victory is mine, 'Tamerlion'.” Chris cooed coquettishly. "I have successfully mounted and mated with you and it is I who is on top!"

I lay there, exhausted, but feeling like a great pressure had been lifted. Tearing my eyes away from the bewitching Chris for a moment I watched a few stray beads of saliva and semen taper off her breasts and past her erotic hips and womanhood and onto my manhood. My manhood that had returned to normal. It was still rock hard though. I wasn't done yet. If Chris was serious, then for my sake, her sake and everyone else’s', I'd need to get serious too.

“Hu hu hu.” I chuckled. “It's far from over, Chris.”

Chris looked back down at me with that dazed expression.

“If mounting is a euphemism for sex. Then that didn't even count!”

Her eyes widened and she snapped out of her daze,

“What?”

“I haven't even used 'that'!”

With the brief window of opportunity I had been given, I shifted my hips and my body underneath Chris' weight. With my member now it's proper size, I pulled back and relying on a little luck that I'd make it count, I slid my body backwards and brought my head to Chris' entrance. She tweaked momentarily is surprise, but just as I had hesitated before, she had already lost. I pushed forward, it took more effort than I thought, but my head pieces through the wall and folds of flesh and plunged itself deep inside Chris.

Chris seized up immediately and let out a yelp. Her body went tense, her eyes unfocused and I could feel her walls tighten up and squeeze around me hard and savagely. I ignored it all and kept pushing forward until I came to the base and couldn't push forward anymore. Chris panicking, tried to move away, but her own pussy had already clamped down hard, and no matter how far back she pushed, I pushed forward and her insides kept pulling me along regardless. Tears welled up in her eyes and she moaned and cried out a little in pain at the sudden attack. If she hadn't said what she did and the situation wasn't so dire, I might have felt bad. Instead I felt entranced and emboldened.

“Ah~ Ow ow ow.” She cried. Then she looked down at where we had connected with a confounded expression. “It's... inside?”

“That's what sex is.” I calmly said.

“It hurts.” She complained in an uncharacteristic quaint voice.

“It won’t for too much longer. Until then...”

I sunk my fingers into the ample muscly flesh of her rear end. I could feel the muscles far away at the base of her tail flinch and react. Her long scaly dragon tail swaying back and forth behind her in a panic. The strength of it smashed and brushed aside a few heavy boxes with ease, but I continued anyways. I kicked up with my hips and pulled her up with what strength I could muster in my arms. Every time her walls slid against my cock I felt myself being sucked right back inside and I was fighting against some beast inside her that refused to let me go until she dropped back down on my hips again. Every time I moved she grinned trying to bear with the pain of being split open down below.

Chris' back had straightened and she was riding cowgirl style with her wings tucked close to her body and pointing up toward the ceiling. Her powerful legs had lost their strength and after a few more thrusts might have gone numb and become pliable. After a few more thrusts I managed to shift my weight from underneath her and sit up straight on the pile of blankets. My face now level with her breasts I continued my counterattack and took her right nipple between my front teeth and teased it by biting down lightly on it. I was rewarded with an erotic moan which broke out from the pained grunts she had been letting out until now. Nibbling and pull back at her breast I then wrapped my mouth around it and began to suck hard at the tip and she threw her head back in response and I could feel her whole body tense up and squeeze down hard around my shaft.

I had to stop for a moment or risk blowing my load early, but a little effort and concentration later I fought back the urge and set myself back a few steps. Chris' brought her head back and after that surge of pleasure that had coursed through her body I felt her slacken all over as she let go of her tension all together. I wasn't about to risk her getting back to her senses. If she got her strength back, she'd pin me back down in a second. If she moved at her own pace like before, I doubt I'd last long and I don't know if I have a third go left in me. I had to make this one count and make her admit defeat.

Emboldened, I removed my hands from hear rear and wrapped them underneath the taut muscles behind her thighs and lifted her up. I learned over and placed her back on the floor. Still in a daze, she watched me with a mix of eroticism in her eyes.

“Is this the kind of mounting you are looking for?”

I pushed her thighs until her legs rested on each side of her, her knees next to her head, her back curled and her pussy sticking straight up into the air where I was still connected with her. Holding her legs down I rocked my hips back and forth, up and down, plunging down and pulling out only to be pulled back in and spurred on by my own instincts try to plunge further and further in every thrust. Chris' wings laid flat against the stone where her vicious and menacing talons lay helpless. Somewhere in the back of my head, I was well aware that one errant slash with those things could tear me half with ease, but every time I looked at the panting moaning face of hers, I just kept going instead.

Between my legs her tail dragged across the stone floor and I

could almost swear the boney steel hard scales caused a spark or two, but that tail never swished up and welted me. Again, I'm sure she could easily do that if she wanted to. Maybe... Just maybe she can't right now... Maybe deep down inside this is what she wants? Was she being serious, or had she already lost? That doesn't matter now, I won't snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. I will see this through to the end.

I could feel quivers through the walls of her vagina twisting, pulling, bending and pulling at my member and I could tell she was reaching the limit of another orgasm. It was as if her insides were desperately spurring me on toward my own toward a dramatic finish. I felt myself being pulled further and further forward until I was leaning over her, holding myself up mostly by my hands now resting on the back of her scaly wyvern calves. Despite how much taller than me she was, I was bending closer and closer toward her face, her jaw slackened, her tongue loose and a trail of drool coming out from the corner of her mouth. I found myself bewitched as my face came closer and closer. When Chris was finally aware that I was so close I had already pressed my lips up against her own.

Her eyes lit up and widened in surprise, but eventually relaxed and returned to their dazed erotic stupor. I pushed forward with my tongue and twirled it around her own and it aggressively fought back as they entwined together between us. That embrace was the last straw in the struggle between the two of us as her gasps for air as she approached climax caused me to pull back, but after a quick breath she shot back up and locked lips with me again. Her wings coming to life and wrapping around my head to keep me there. Her legs which had been pliable also sprung back to life and pushed back to wrap themselves around my back. Left to hold myself up by my hands as I was bending Chris over backwards I sped up as I reached my limit and the convulsions and contractions I felt inside Chris also intensified and sped up.

Locked in that embrace, I made my last few strokes and on the last one Chris tightened up and pulled me as close to her as possible and held me there as I let loose once again and a torrent of my seed flowed into womb. She let out a long but muffled moan as our mouths and lips were still locked, but eventually we separated, desperate for air as my hips kept twitching back and forth to expunge every last drop welled up inside me. Free again, we both moaned and howled together as the long series of contractions and pleasurable pulses coursed through our bodies.

With the last bit of strength leaving my body I collapsed onto of Chris as her legs uncrossed from behind my back and her wings guided me gently to rest on top of her body where my head found a pillow between her breasts. There I rested in Chris' warm embrace laying on of her.

“Victory... Is yours.” Chris panted, short of breath. “My master.”

My eyebrows furrowed at the word and I rolled off her, laid at her side and looked her in the eyes, which were very soft and sincere now.

“Hold on a second. What was that?”

“The mounting ritual is done. You have won, master.”

That's a new one.

“Master?” Chris said, tilting her head sideways.

“Don't you think that's a little too formal?”

Chris' own expression soon matched my own, as though I was asking a very confusing question. She sat up, then stood up and I followed her.

“But you have won, it is your right... Master.”

“No no no, that isn't right. That doesn't suit me at all. It just gives me a... complicated feeling. Especially since we did this just to-”

“-Did this because I wanted it. Long ago, a wyvern would not just eat any human. They only sought to eat those that were worthy. 'You are what you eat' as some would say. I would not have challenged nor accepted if I did not desire you or was willing to accept the risk of losing... Which is just as good too.” She said, the last part barely audible.

Hold up. She isn't just saying in a roundabout way-

“Look. You can just keep going as you were before.”

“Is that an order?” She asked seriously.

I let out a deep sigh as I turned around and gathered up my underwear which had slid off at some point. I thought about things, really heavy and complicated things for a few moments. Retrieving my

pants and pulling those on and buckling my belt I turned back to Chris who was still waiting patiently. I stood tall, turned to face her.

With resolution in my voice I made my declaration, “I have just one order. After everything that I've said and even after everything we've done: Do whatever makes you happy.”

Chris jaw dropped and her eyes widened. Her gold colored reptilian eyes quivered and moistened, almost tearing up completely. She closed her eyes and with a bright and wide smile nodded.

“Yes, Laven!”

Sparkling as she was that moved me almost as much as she was moved. Humming cheerfully and beautifully some other song. It sounded like a theme song if anything actually... She gathered up her own clothes and dressed herself. Like a stagehand crisscrossing behind a stage, she bustled and moved back into position and as if under some imaginary spotlight. There she took a deep breath and stood perfectly still, her head cast downward and staring at the ground. Suddenly she slid one of her talons across the floor and threw her arms around in purposeful patterns, a new hand signal and position every few words in a perfect rhythm.

“Now, Master!” She shouted out, the familiar heroic tone having returned to her voice. “Allow me. To show you. My final form! Justice! Judgment Form! Transform!”

In a flash of white light, her entire body became luminescent, almost blindingly so. She was letting out a constant droning kiai as though she was gathering up energy from deep inside her. I had to cover my eyes with my hands as that white silhouette began to shift and transform. I had to crane my head upwards as she did. The human parts of her gave way, her upper arms melded into her wings and her scaly legs lower overcame her toned and white skinned thighs. Her torso bulged and enlarged, losing its female shape, no, it's human shape and transforming into something truly monstrous. The horns on her head also grew larger, as did her neck and even her tail which grew fatter. Her voice and her kiai eventually changed into a deep bestial roaring shriek as her vocal cords changed.

I had only one thought to myself as I watched what looked like some magical girl transformation.

Yes... This will work.

Chapter 45

Heralded by the clatter of steel on cobblestone and the clinking of spurs, the hulking man adorned in the panoply of war marched through the war torn streets of Ifern. In a steel suit of armor, finely crafted, gilded, trimmed and decorated with silver paint vines and a great golden boar across its chest; the man's audacious display shouted out his status for everyone's eyes to hear. Escorting him where a squadron of nine soldiers, one markedly taller than the other beside him and the others following two by four. The eight trailing behind were smaller in statue than the average man, but the clatter of all their steel greaves on the cobblestone only added to the man's own march. Cloaked in thick robes that hid themselves away, but could not help in the clatter of steel underneath that betrayed how armed and armored they were. If everyone continued being wise and not stare for too long, they wouldn't notice these soldiers were not human.

All around him soldiers tore families from their houses and marched them under guard in the opposite direction his own miniature parade went. They were pulled, shoved, and threatened onward. They were corralling away from the capital and into the camps waiting for them in the outskirts. Wailing children, pleading mothers and fathers trying to act brave, they all watched the man march by. The colors he raised were different, but it was without a doubt their Prince. Prince Deron, under the banner of a boar.

Refugee camps; that is what Deron called them. A safe place for all the citizens of Ifern to hide will he let his army throw themselves against the mighty Ifern citadel. A liberator; that is how Deron thought of himself. This wasn't an army sent to pillage, sack and rape the capital. After today the people would return, rebuild his capital and cheer as he rode down the streets revealing in his victory and coronation forthwith afterward. Far ahead that mighty citadel was smoldering, burning, crumbling, but still refusing to fall. When he saw that the Princess' banners still flew atop the central keep, his expression soured.

Marching at a brisk pace, a troop of similarity dressed men approached the man with their entourage and saluted with the utmost respect. Removing their helmets in deference to the man, they had complex and worried expressions on their faces as they suffered under the glare of the man whose patience was scarce if it existed at all.

“Sire, I am glad to see you are well and have made it here unharmed.” One of the men spoke.

“Of course I am alright, Count Elric.” Deron snarled in return. “What I am not is pleased. Why have you not stormed the castle yet?”

“Just as you instructed, sire, we sent a team through an old escape passage leading back into the castle. There we came across Heggs and the other ministers in the process of fleeing as you predicted. We took them into custody. Would you prefer to see them-?”

“Be rid of them immediately. I have no time to deal with worms. What is more important to me, is why you could not take the tower after that.” Deron growled, leaning over Elric who cowered backward in response.

“They were repelled sire. The passage then collapsed. Heavy casualties. We were forced to batter and break through the main gate and fight through the courtyards and corridors.”

“Repelled? General Atrus...” If Deron had been trying to appear civil before, he certainly wasn't now as he snarled the man's name.

While a runner took the message of Deron's last order, the other general stepped forward to cover for his ally.

“Sire, we believe the escape of the minsters and the attack from that hidden passageway was somehow anticipated. The few survivors and those that escaped the collapse of the tunnel told us they confronted not only Lord Rissler, but the Thorn Knight as well.”

“The Thorn Knight?” Deron gritted his teeth. “But that bastard was at...”

“S-sire, the tunnel itself seemed to have collapsed through some magic means. Sappers have not been able to break through the rubble and excavate the tunnel either.”

“Forget about the tunnel!” Deron bellowed. “I leave you in charge to take the castle in my absence so that I may march into the throne room upon my return and you give me nothing but excuses. I leave you my army along with perhaps the most powerful brigade of special troops the North has ever seen with you to bash your way through and you cannot lead them to victory against some poorly and hastily trained rabble?”

A third lord spoke up, interrupting Deron, “Rissler's royal guards hold the walls and the choke points. Neither were we informed

of the presence of monster allies within the palace. Leaving aside the Thorn Knight, they have a potent spell caster among them. They must. Knights who have been spotted severely injured on the walls retreat and return within the hour, fully healed and battle ready. My prince, defending the Ifern Keep with these tools at their disposal is also something a child could-"

"Prince? Zacreich? PRINCE?" Deron screamed, turning to the man. "I am KING. Not PRINCE."

Clanging his right gauntlet against the side of his leg her signaled the golem guarding him at his side to step forward. The girl faced hi then knelt and received his order.

"Take Lord Zacreich to the Iron Pit. Let your superior know he is to not receive the kindest treatment nor shall he leave!"

While his men were stunned and bewildered, Zacreich watched as the girl stood back up to give a hollow 'yes master' before mechanically approaching him and seizing him by the arm. Even though the girl was half his weight, she twisted the grown man's arm behind him back, a distinct popping sound as his arm was dislocated at the shoulder. Between screams of pain and cries for mercy the golem pushed and kicked the man along until they both disappeared back down the main drag behind them. The men watched the whole scene in horror, but quickly jumped back to attention when Deron's eyes settled back down on them, slightly calmer than before, his stress slightly alleviated.

A fair word of sound judgment was something Deron had been known to welcome from his subordinate. However, the time had come when Deron's patience would not tolerate deviation from his plan. He cared not for the consequences of his actions anymore. All that mattered was that he sat upon the throne of all Domdracveria now. He had planned for this day for nearly a decade and had rued and wished for the day even further back, Perhaps as far back as the birth of the scar on his chest.

"The Iron Pit, my liege?" Atrus gulped, shook his head and before his lord's eyes turned back on him with that same fervor, he decided to change the subject for his own benefit. "I wanted to inform you that your orders were that no citizen be harmed. Those 'mercenaries' you included into the army a few days before we set off to march... They have been spotted deserting and disobeying orders. Dragging boys, men enemy and soldiers even our own soldiers away."

“How many?” Deron asked.

“So far one in eight, my liege.”

“Within expectations. Do not concern yourself with it. After the battle, they will be dealt with and deactivated.” With his second order issued, Deron strode forward and the troop in front of him scrambled to part and make way. To his generals who fell in behind him, he screamed his orders at them again, “Take me to the front lines at once.”

“Yes sire. The main gate was demolished before we arrived, but the siege tower was successfully mounted on the south wall so that-”

Atrus' report was cut off suddenly by a distant screeching wail far in the distance. He thought nothing of it, but Deron came to a halt immediately. The entire column came to an abrupt stop in a panic so that they would not collide into the Prince's back, but even they were not aware why immediately. The screech rang out again, louder than before but still only just above the sound of battle nearby.

“What in the hells is that?” Atrus shouted out to his subordinates behind him, demanding and answer.

Deron did not need to ask. He turned toward the south and looked up into the sky. His eyes had shot open in surprise. They had spotted something in the sky far away, they then furrowed and knitted and his face contorted into an angry snarled mess.

“No one would... No... That's impossible... He couldn't have.”

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My arms were sore from holding on tight for the last few hours, but I endured through the freezing alpine winds. I had to endure. There wasn't any time to spare. It was a matter of hours, minutes, not days to reach Ifern. As we flew over the mountains, I as they shrunk and grew until they finally disappear behind us. Chris' speed was so great that the whipping winds dragged across my face like sharp nails, yet I endured. I could only spur Chris onward. I held on tight, pinching my knees against her flanks and holding onto two ends of a rope I flung around her neck. Those were about all I had stopping me from slipping off her backside and plummeting the kilometer or so onto the craggy rocks below.

Chris had transformed and it wasn't like any of the regular

exaggeration on her part. She was a tall girl before, but now she stood four meters at the shoulder. She had morphed from her human-like form into something far more familiar. I had been told many times that the dragonkin do not answer to the demon lord, that they retain much of the pride before her ascension and this allows them a great deal of free will; even over their own forms. While the demon lord's power is awesome and frankly terrifies me the more I hear about it, Chris, like other dragonkin, is able to assume the true form of a wyvern. It is only temporary, but whatever changes to monsters were made to mimic and impersonate humans. All that has been washed away for now.

"The capital isn't far off, master. Over this peak." Chris' voice rang out in my head.

She didn't have the vocal cords to speak, but ever since our escape from the tower, she had been talking directly into my head. It was some sort of telepathy. Born from the ritual and the bond we created during it. So she claims. I couldn't talk back in the same way, so I had to make due with trying to scream louder than the roaring winds as we flew. My voice was nearly hoarse and I had been resting it for the better part of an hour. While flying Chris had been humming something inside my head. I'm not one to give much credit to coincidences, but I thought it sounded far too much like some theme song from a Saturday morning cartoon. It took me forever to get her to stop. It lost its appeal after the seventy-sixth time.

I'm surprised I wasn't more hesitant about screaming at a wyvern to stop her joyful humming. That dinosaur-like head attached that that long neck of hers... I think she could easily bite down on my entire head and just a little effort swallow me whole. Despite that, I felt safe deep down inside. That bubbly and jovial hero speech of hers bounced around inside my head every so often and I didn't feel a shred of some primal instinctual fear when looking at her in her other form. A form a lot of people probably held in their heart of hearts as her 'true form'. It had me mulling over some complicated things.

Only a few generations ago, that was how this world was. Monsters preying on humans and humans locked in constant battle for survival with these overwhelming beasts. Just how did the humans manage to survive so long? Back at the cave I watched as Chris with bulging muscles tore away with ease at the pile of debris. Whole boulders snatched, crushed and pulled aside in her mighty talons. Earth shattering blows from her tail as it whipped and smashed the stone into pebbles. Her powerful wings seemingly ignoring the principles of aerodynamics and holding us both aloft. Not only that, but

flying us about two hundred kilometers per hour. Just how did humans compete with creatures capable of all that? How did any man fight one to the death and win to become a dragoon?

I didn't have those answers, all I had right now was about two tons of flying fire breathing muscle underneath me and a mission.

Riding the winds, we crested over the last peak and saw Ifern in the distance and below us. Columns of smoke had billowed up into the skies and replaced what would have been blue skies after the storm. Now there was nothing but dark black clouds of smoke. Most of it seemed to be rising from the citadel which stands guard over the city. The very sight of it burning caused my heart to sink. We had flown as fast as we could... Had we spent too much time locked away in that cell of stone? Was it too late?

Chris did not match my own morbid sense of failure, “I see it! I see Vio's colors! They're flying!”

I couldn't see anything other than the burning city.

“What do you mean?” I shouted.

“The main tower. Above it. They're still flying Vio's banners!”

The citadel was still several kilometers away... Then again, Chris' eyes were unnaturally sharp. They were like an eagle’s, being able to see your prey clearly on the ground far below you was a must for any bird of prey. There was nothing else I could do other than believe her and allow my doubt and worry to wash off me and be blown away by the wind.

“Then they haven't stormed the throne room yet!” I gave a long sigh of relief.

“Onward Master! To the Princess' side!”

Chris let out a roar and shrieking cry as she folded her wings and we fell into a dive. Swooping down the side of the mountain and into the valley we'd glide our way toward the citadel after picking up the last burst of much needed speed. However, the closer we got to Ifern, we got a sense of just how large Deron's army had become. All the torches and tiny ants encased in steel below milling about with purpose. Except after Chris' triumphant roars and shrieks, then those little points started moving erratically. I had watched enough old war films to have a good idea what someone does when they hear a dive

bomber descending rapidly from above, blaring its distinctive whistle.

Leveling out about a hundred meters above the ground as we came to the end of the sheer cliffs of the Wyrmback Mountains we rapidly approached what looked like Deron's main camp outside the city, funneling supplies and reinforcements.

“I see civilians too! They're rounding up the people!” Chris shouted, her eyes furrowing.

“Well. We can't allow that.” I said in response, crossing my arms over my chest.

Deron must me getting them out of the capital so he can run wild. Especially if he's gonna have those golems go all out. Seeing those things in action is something he probably wants to keep hidden from the public. Although he might have gone so far off the deep end he might just want them all gathered in one place to purge if they get rebellious after his coup. We certainly couldn't allow that whether we win or lose today.

“They fill up those camps yet, Chris?”

“Master?”

“Every one of those torches is an enemy, Chris. It's about time Deron learns not everything is going to go easy for him today. We're gonna bust up their rear line on the way in.”

Letting out a roar in acknowledgment, Chris banked softly right and flew directly toward the center of Deron's main camp. An occasional missile came whizzing upwards, only to miss completely or the occasional one deflecting harmlessly off Chris' scaled belly. As she straightened out and lined up the targets in front of her I could feel air flow into her lungs. Instead of just air being exhaled, a jet stream of fire shot out. Turning her head left and right she raked the column of flame across the camp below. Dodging left and right the soldiers took cover the best they could, but not all could run faster than the flames and were lit on fire. Amid the screams they flailed and threw themselves to the ground where they tried to roll about and extinguish the napalm like flames.

The more I saw it, the more I began to think it wasn't just a simple cone of flame. I thought it was very much like napalm, but maybe it pretty much is a lit stream of a jelly like compound. A separate gland or two deep in her throat that excreted an extremely

flammable natural concoction. Just dousing it with water wouldn't do a thing unless you got that oily like saliva off you. You might just even spread the fire if you did that.

As we pulled back up into the sky after leaving a trail of destruction and inferno behind I looked back and noticed a large supply deposit still left over. I yanked on the ropes to get Chris' attention.

“Hey! You missed that one!” I said leaning over to point my finger where she could see it. “Make one more pass!”

Circling in the air and coming down for another pass, Chris let loose another cry and I held on tight as she dive bombed the camp once more. I could feel her lungs fill with air, but this time I also heard what sounded like phlegm collecting in the back of her throat. If I didn't know any better, I would say she was getting ready to spit out a massive loogie.

The rear guard of the camp had become wiser to our attack and coordinated their fire, making it a formidable wall of anti-aircraft fire toward the sky. Deron certainly wasn't messing around; these guys were disciplined and well trained. It wasn't wise to get too close, the closer we were, the more punch each of those arrows had before gravity took their toll on their momentum. Pulling up from her dive at about one hundred meters from the ground, she didn't let loose another spray of fire, but a large ball of flame instead. I watched as it shot out from her mouth, roar and spin through the air flicking with wild embers like a huge firecracker. It was like watching a hellfire missile, it followed a simple trajectory and on impact it actually exploded. Wood splinters and the immolated contents inside were thrown in every direction as the plume of fire and smoke arose from where the pule had been.

With the second strafing run complete, we took back off into the sky for the last time and left the smoldering camp behind us. I almost had to feel a little guilty about how easy that was. Why dragoons were a well respected and feared group had been sufficiently demonstrated to me. I don't want to imagine what an entire squadron could do to an unprotected foe below. I felt like I was along for the ride in an attack helicopter. It was overkill against a bunch of helpless agrarian feudal knights and mercenaries

“Justice be done!” Chris cheered. “That will teach them to raise a sword to the Princess!”

“That's all well and good, but how much time we got left?” I asked.

“I should be able to maintain Judgment Form for a few more minutes, master.”

“Good. We just need enough to get to that tower and rendezvous with the others. Then we'll- Whoa, what the hell do we have down there?”

Soaring toward the city I noticed a large wooden tower against the outer wall of the castle. It has to be at least six stories tall, how they got it to that inner courtyard is beyond me, it is just tall enough to drop a ramp down on the outer wall of the castle which hangs over the upper district of the city. Holding it in place were a latticework of ropes, probably just to safely anchor it in place. Deron's army was most likely funneling into the castle through that siege tower.

As we flew above the city, I could actually hear the sound of cheering from below. I looked down and I was met with the cheers and jubilation of the citizens of Ifern below. Soldiers were everywhere in the street, shepherding them away from their homes and out of city, but as we soared above them, the entire army came to a halt and watched us fly above. Amid all the cheering I heard the chants praising the dragoons, some begging and asking for help and cries of thank yous. As I thought all along... The people had been waiting for the dragoons. No one cared about some law that forbid them from flying in times like this. Deron... I hope you're seeing this and listening. Maybe this next display will get it through your thick skull that you are out of touch.

We definitely couldn't just let that siege tower stay there.

“Chris! Change of plans. We'll tear down that tower on the way in.”

“Laven...?” Chris gasped in disbelief.

I got the impression in the inflection from her voice that she was a little skeptical as to the 'how' it would be done. Still, Chris pulled back up and we circled above the castle so that I might get a better view. Time was short, so my head had to work fast. Luckily, I spotted what I needed to right off the bat. Why were all those ropes tying the tower to the wall? With a bird's eye view from various angles I spotted that the ground was uneven. Or so I got that impression.

“Chris? The courtyard there-”

“It's covered with stuff. That kind of stuff won’t burn.”

“I figured. But that courtyard. It's got a downward slope, right?”

“Of course, so that it's harder to- Oh!”

Clever girl. I think she's got what I was thinking.

“Right! Master! Going in!”

The highest concentration of soldiers so far was gathered below us. Among them I could see the golems as well. They were few and far between and huddled into concentrated groups so they could be avoided rather easily, but I knew anything they threw or did was going to be a lot more effective than what Deron's men had been tossing our way. There's no way we could risk landing and trying to attack that tower to tear it apart. Instead...

Dodging the wall of arrows and stones being fired upward, I held on tight as Chris dived talons stretched in front of her. As thick and tight as those ropes were, the tension in them was no match for Chris' talons that could rend steel. A few passes and I could see the tower was beginning to list slightly on its side. Just one push would do it.

“Chris!” I shouted out, 'now is the time' I wanted her to feel.

Flying up higher than before, Chris folded back her wings and made like an arrow herself. I held on for dear life as we came barreling down out of the sky in what was probably nearing three hundred kilometers per hour. No arrow or stone could catch us, and Chris' one ton frame going that fast slammed into the side of the listing siege tower.

“Ridden! KIIIIIIICK!” I heard screaming in my head along with a fierce ear shattering shriek.

Chris' talons collided with the top of the tower, our speed came to a near halt in an instant. If I hadn't been holding on tight and wrapping my arms around her neck, I may have just been flung forward and off into the distance. On impact, there was a mighty crunch and splinting of wood as the top of the tower was nearly torn clean off. The tower was probably at a list of about five degrees before,

but it was suddenly plowed at a twenty five. A few powerful beats of her wings to propel us forward kept that momentum going instead of rocking backwards and soon the entire tower itself was collapsing under its own weight as it lifted off the ground by its wheels. From inside the tower men were attempting to flee, but for many it was already too late. The tower slammed into the ground, shattered and threw a mighty dust cloud into the air.

Chris furiously took off after impact, we were sitting targets if we didn't. Luckily the shear shock and awe of the attack had created a brief few seconds to take back off into the skies. Behind us we left a chaotic mess as the soldiers inside the castle were cut off from the outside. I had just noticed that the gate itself was destroyed. Collapsed in on itself. I think we had just bought ourselves a lot of time.

Once back into the skies I let out a laugh, quiet and short at first, but I couldn't hold back my own enthusiasm and soon Chris was laughing herself. Ifern was having a bad day until we showed up, I suppose we were entitled to feel a little good about it. For the short amount of time we had to do so.

Just as suddenly I was nearly blinded by a fierce flash of white light in front of me and when I opened them again I found myself piggyback riding on Chris' back. I was only holding onto her shoulders just barely and I felt myself slipping backwards, causing me to panic on reflect and wrap my arms around her to stop myself from slipping and falling to my certain doom.

“Ack! Laven, I can't... fly like this!” Chris protested, her arms a mess and unable to hold us aloft.

“Chris! Just land! Do it now!”

I felt my right hand grab onto something large and soft as I looked for a better grip while Chris tried to fly, but when I heard Chris give a yelp of surprise, I knew I had made a poor choice. Instead I grabbed harder as she shook and shuddered in the sky.

“Master~ Please, don't ah~” She moaned.

“I can't help it, I'm gonna fall!”

“We're going down!”

As I held onto Chris tight, the best she could do was hold her arms out and try to glide us down. Glide might be the wrong word.

What we seemed to be doing was going into a controlled crash. Controlled being perhaps a bit of liberal word to be using. What worried me the most was that while we may be spiraling toward the main tower, that tower is ninety percent stone wall. Not exactly the best landing pad, given that it was also all vertical. Chris was desperately trying to control our fall and we finally began to level out. Our speed didn't slow down though. Imagine that was regrettably going to happen on impact. Hopefully with something softer than stone.

I managed to lay my eyes on Chris' target, a wooden extension of the tower, a whole separate miniature tower hanging off the side. As we got closer and closer, swooping down further and further, I finally laid my eyes on the window, a glass window. Glass: slightly softer than wood.

With a crash, our entwined bodies crashed through, hit the floor inside the tower and kept rolling and rolling over one another until our combined weight crashed into the room. We kept rolling until we passed through the room, crashing through the door and into hallway were finally smashed into stone which finally brought us to a halt.

I clenched my toes and flexed my fingers... At least I still had feeling in them. That was good news. Next, I bent my elbows and knees but I still couldn't get up, there was something heavy on top of me. I opened my eyes I found myself laying on back with Chris laying down on top of me. Behind me there was a conspicuous wyvern shaped crater in the stone wall, luckily, she had been the one to hit it. I think I might have died if it was me, but when I peeled off her, she must have fallen on top of me to break her fall when she fell backwards as well.

“Chris? You okay?” I asked.

“Wha? I couldn't possibly have another bite governor.”

Okay maybe she hit that wall a little too hard.

“Please be careful your highness. I heard something up ahead.” A voice said behind a corner somewhere.

“Hey!” I cried out. “Little help here please!”

“That voice?” the man gasped in surprise.

Around the corner came a familiar man, Rissler and a few of his knights at his side.

“By gods... Is that you Mr. Laven?” Rissler inquired tentatively.

“Mr. Laven?” Came another girly voice from around the corner.

In a long flowing white dress, the face and figure of Princess Violette appeared despite the efforts of the knights to hold her back.

“Mr.- Chris!” She suddenly shouted when she spotted the wyvern sitting on top of me with swirls in her eyes.

By the mere sound of her voice Chris shook her head and stood up immediately, looking desperately back and forth until she finally laid eyes on the Princess.

“Vio!” She squealed.

Throwing her massive wingspan open she ran toward the princess and wrapped them around her, lifting her up into the air and spinning round and round. It was a touching sight.

“What? What's up there? They make it this far already?” A voice earnestly spilled out from behind the others.

As I got to my feet I spotted Rose coming around the corner nearly at a run as she skid across the floor for a bit before coming to a stop. The furious battle lust eyes of hers disappeared in a second and her mouth gaped open instead.

I waved, “Hey. Sorry I stepped out so-”

“LAVEN!” She screamed like a school girl.

Like a bullet, she came careening into me as her head butted against my chest with the force of a runaway train. Silly me for thinking I'd get out of all this without an injury. As I laid flattened and winded on the floor Rose was rubbing her cheek up against mine with wild abandon as she wrapped her claws around me hard enough for my shoulder blades to creek under the pressure.

“Yes...” I gasped. “Nice to see you again too.”

“Honestly... I told you time after time that he would return forthwith.” Said Susan who had materialized beside us.

She wasn't looking at me though, she had her nose turned up

and was looking away, her arms crossed in front of her chest. She seemed pretty sullen, but when I looked behind her, I noticed her dog tail wildly swishing back and forth.

“Nice to see you again too Susan.”

Susan's cheeks turned a bright red and she swiped behind her back with a paw to grab hold of her tail and force it to stay still.

“Hmph.” She pouted. “I was not disquieted in the least.”

I'm not sure if I believe that, but now wasn't the time to argue. Since no one was helping I desperately tried to pry Rose off of me who was still in the process of hugging me, rubbing her cheek against me and dry humping me all at the same time.

“Yeah yeah yeah I get it already. I messed up. I'll take whatever punishment later. Right now, there happens to be an entire freaking army waiting to crash in here.” I said still trying to pry Rose off and plead with Susan.

“How the hell did you two get here?” Rissler asked at last.

“... We flew?” I answered not sure if that was trick question or not.

“Obviously, but through the army outside-? You didn't... Oh... You sly dog you.” Rissler said with a wry grin on his face.

I blushed as he saw right through me.

“Yeah yeah yeah, we also caused a lot of trouble out there for them. We bought twenty minutes or so. Maybe. I hope you all had a plan, because I spent all mine just getting here.”

“Nothing but a last stand I'm afraid... There aren't enough of us left to fight off everything. The rest of the regulars are holding the door in. Let me and my guards here try to take the princess somewhere safer. With the secret passage gone...”

So it wasn't really any safer in here after all? I should have expected as much. I guess I did expect it actually. However, a thought that had been brewing in the back of my head came into fruition. Deron. Deron was the key. He was losing patience and wants to deal with the Princess himself. That means...

“No. We still got a chance.”

“Mr. Laven?” The princess quietly stepped forward. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Princess. I'm gonna be frank. Your brother is coming. He wants to end this all personally.” I saw the life drain from her eyes, so I hurriedly continued. “As bad as this sounds and perhaps a little out of line, that's good news for us. If we can just hold off long enough, Deron will show up himself.”

“You sure about that?” Rissler said wanting confirmation.

“Yes. That's what I get from the man. Everything hangs on him. We get him to come forward and we deal with him before anyone gets to the Princess.”

“Deal with?” The princess asked nearly shaking.

“Make him bleed like stuck pig, one last time.” Rissler morbidly added.

Violetta looked down toward the floor, Chris wrapping one of her wings around her shoulder to comfort her. In her hands, the princess was rubbing an index finger over her royal ring. That fancy ring with the huge emerald embedded in it. I remember seeing her fiddling with that ring before. Something she does when she's obviously worried. She's a quiet and frail girl, one who tries her best not to wear her feelings on her sleeve, but she has some pretty obvious tells. Chris rested the talons on one of her forearms on top of the Princess hands, looking her in the eyes and pulling it away. She looked her deep in the eyes and the princess buried her face in Chris' chest, just to hide her tears no doubt.

“Well, we've wasted enough time here. You two!” Rissler said turning to the two royal guards behind him. “Looks like our path is clear, bring up the other men and the wounded.”

The path?

“You all heading somewhere?” I asked.

“The throne room. Most easily guarded room in the whole castle.”

“Yeah. That's just what Deron has been thinking too no doubt. And that's perfect.”

Susan let out a short chuckle, “It appears my liege has concocted a stratagem.”

I wish I had the confidence to call it that, Susan. I really do.

“We'll hold up in the throne room as long as we can. However long we can... Outnumbered and with those golems though...”

“Golems?” Rissler asked puzzled.

“Those women in Deron's army. They're not human. They're monsters. Golems he had created just for this attack.”

“What?” Rose quipped. “Is that why when one of their arms got cut off they still kept coming?”

She says that so casually.

“You gotta aim for where their heart should be. That's their weakness.”

Rissler was now legitimately surprised, “How do you know this, Laven?”

“Long story. If we survive I'll tell you all about it.”

“Laaaaven~” Rose pouted. “You went on an adventure without me. Didn't you?”

“Rose. Not now-”

Aw crap she actually looks pretty pissed.

“Alright already, I get it. Anything you want, Rose. Can you just let go of me already? We need to get ready. This isn't gonna be an easy fight.

“Heh.” She laughed letting go and standing to her feet. “Just watch husband. I'll show you victory from the mall of defeat.”

Maw. It's 'maw' Rose.... Dammit. I actually missed that. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Husband?” Chris chirped, tilting her head. She then looked at me with confused eyes, “Master?”

“Master?” Rose and Susan both parroted at the same time, looked at each other and then back down at me.

Princess Violetta blushed. Rissler laughed.

“Explaining later!” I shouted in a monotonous strained voice. “We're fighting now.”

I quickly got to my feet and marched forward. Rose and Susan fell into line behind me and then appeared on my right and left side prodding with more questions. I could only try to shout over them to get them to back down.

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Chris shrugging her shoulders trotted along to give chase. She looked back to beckon Violetta to follow before she then broke out into a jog to catch up with Laven. Violetta, alone, with a sullen and complicated expression on her face as she watched the man and the three monsters march off into the distance. She held her ring in her hand and traced the emerald, pinching it between her fingers. Her eyes followed the back of the man as he was very animated even during these dire times. She blushed a little while Rissler was busy coordinating the men behind. Finally, the Princess picked up the hem of her long dress and hurried up to follow Laven.

Chapter 46

The throne room had not changed, but its inhabitants and purpose certainly have. The bickering and gossiping nobles vying for influence, status and prestige have been replaced by soldiers and knights. These men were here before to serve nothing more than pieces of furniture. Standing by to give a sense of importance to those who come here. A level of self gratification that those nobles needed. Now they mill about with purpose; preparing for war. Doing what they have trained to do. What they had signed up for. All that mattered now was the Princess. Everyone here would sacrifice their own so she could live hers for just a little longer. She wasn't the bureaucracy or the aristocratic life blood of the nation, she was the kingdom itself. Its symbol, everyone's respect and connection with a more glorious past given form. Everyone here was ready to experience death before having to experience the sight of watching her experience her own.

Violetta was on her throne which sat atop a needlessly tall set of stairs. So tall that her quiet voice would not reach the ears of whomever was kneeling below. Not that she had any words to say. Try as she might to look serene, I could only see her shake, tremble and her eyes moisten... She looked ready to let loose the waterworks at any moment. Was she upset and wishing this would all go away? Was she simply scared of being killed? Scared to see the insane look in her brother's eye as he comes to end her life?... Maybe she just feels guilty that everyone gathered here would lose their own lives before she loses her own? I don't know the answer. I won't pretend to. She closes her heart to everyone except for Chris and Chris had no words. Maybe out of respect, but maybe because she had no words that were unbiased or both true and nice.

So why was I here? Because I said I would be? I had to be either willfully bullheaded or stupid for that. Was I a sucker for the damsel in distress? No, I think I don't think I have to go sticking my head out for damsels to come my way and it's usually me in distress. 'Make a run for it' was an idea turned over in my head a few times. I'm sure Deron was obsessed with this throne and nothing else. I could very easily just slip away with the girls. They might protest, but I'm they'd follow in the end. I'm also sure that's not what they'd want. Was I staying because of what was expected of me? No, that doesn't sit right with me either...

"We don't got much, but we barricaded the entrance the best we can. Least we can do is make it a little harder to get in." Rissler said beside me.

I hardly noticed him at all. Just how long had he been talking while I was out of it?

“If they ever get around to the servant's side entrance though...”

“Leave the gate to the servants’ quarters to me.” Susan declared. “I have analyzed it. It is elder stone and I will manage to seal it for a time.”

“Seal it?” Rissler asked, clearly puzzled.

“Old stone contains latent and ambient magical energies. Such energies make it responsive to enchantment. Therefore, these stones are akin to the those sealing away my old tomb. Protecting it from intrusion for an hour will be elementary. Although I am unable to make any substantial guarantee for any longer.”

“Well...” Rissler groaned, stretching his back as though reliving tension. “That means we can group everyone up front and ignore the back. If you're sure.”

“Positively.” Susan nodded.

“Alright! Funnel em all into the same place!” Rose said excitedly, clenching her claw into a fist. “Won’t lose out on a fight that way. Two fronts is just half the fun.”

“Pace yourself, Thorn Knight,” Rissler lectured. “This could be a long or very short day...”

“Short or long, justice is always on time!” Chris laughed, wings on her hips for her signature heroic stance. “They will regret thinking they could hurt the Princess. Escaping justice is not a thing the wicked can do and they will not escape past me!”

“Heh.” Rose chuckled. “It'll be me they won’t be getting past. You just sit and watch.”

“Fu fu fu.” Chris chuckled herself, leaning down to face off with Rose. “No chance in the seven hells.”

“That's what I intend to do.” Rose retorted not missing a beat, her tail firing up with a short and small explosion.

The two were squaring off. It certainly doesn’t take them long to

be at each other's throats. Growling at each other like that. Chris having to lean over quite a bit just so that the two of them could grind their foreheads together in some kind of mercy fight.

"It will be short. Don't worry." I assured Rissler "Deron will show his face. I'm sure of it."

"I don't doubt you, Laven." Rissler nodded. "If he doesn't..."

"He will. You've known him for longer than I have, but I'm sure even you know after seeing him the last time he was in this room. He isn't the scared little kid anymore. Insecure, yes, but he's also gone completely bonkers. Only we have to-"

"Have the Princess in plain sight on the throne." Rissler gravely scowled.

"I'm sorry I don't have a better way of saying it, but she'll have to be the bait. I'll stick with her. Deron definitely will not be able to resist if I'm there too. He'll want to kill two birds with one stone. If it all goes wrong, I'll pay the price first if I have to."

Rissler looked deep into my eyes after I stuck my neck out like that. Judging me, sizing me up. I did my best to stand as tall as I could with my chest puffed out. If there was anything everyone needed right now, it was some confidence. Finally he gave a smile, nodded and slapped his hand on my shoulder. He didn't say anything more, he walked away and began shouting at his men. Directing those few soldiers from outside who had been retreating back here as well. There were a lot of wounded coming in to. They began populating the back of the throne room...

"Ah~" I heard Rose moan.

I turned to see her resting her cheeks in the palms of her claws looking flirtatiously at me. Chris beside her with folded wings across her chest was also blushing but nodding in approval, her eyes serenely shut. I let out a short grunt of embarrassment.

"So dreamy. I love it when he acts like that." Rose cooed.

"A finer symbol of justice few and far between." Chris agreed.

"D-don't you two have something else to be doing?" I stuttered. "And remember! You're supposed to let Deron through. We're trapping him inside the throne room. We'll kill or capture him

then. If he escapes, everything is lost."

"Watch closely, husband. I'll show you just what I'm capable of. Even when all hope is lost!"

Rose chuckled and left, keeping her gaze on me as long as she was able. Chris looked confused again when Rose called me husband, gave me a strange look but eventually ran after Rose, following close behind her.

"Are you sure this is the preferred course of action?" Susan asked me.

I was taken off guard. I had forgotten she hadn't left yet. She was studying me with those cold red and analytic eyes, probing me for the truth. If she was worried, it certainly didn't show on her face, any emotion rarely show itself on her face for long. Frustration was pretty much the only one too. Rose and Chris were the brash type. If they did feel fear, they drowned it out with their own audacious optimism and delusions. Susan was the type of girl who was absolutely rational and calculating. She could do nothing but take things as they were. Probably turning over this crazy plan of mine in her head over and over again in the last hour or so. If she was worried about my safety, she had good reason to.

"It's the only way to end this whole thing once and for all." I replied.

Susan's eyes narrowed. She wasn't buying it.

I scratched the back of my head, "Alright. If we wanted to, I bet we could escape on our own. I bet the four of us could even escape with the Princess. Then what? Drop her off somewhere? We'd only be stalling her demise. We made a deal right?... Okay, so if everyone died here, no one would be alive who knew about it, but I still can't agree with that."

"All for a deal that was made?" Susan asked.

I was about to say yes, but the words got caught in my throat. Letting my head drop down and look at my feet while I took a deep breath. I'm not sure I even know anymore. When I looked back up, my heart skipped a beat when Susan greeted my gaze with one of her rare smiles. A warm one that you can actually feel.

"The Pharaoh has made his decision. He will live with it, or die by it. So too shall I."

“So too shall you? That's a bit melodramatic, don't you think?”

“I will not persevere long in this world without you, Laven. That is a matter of fact and circumstance. Although I would not desire it any other way.”

Just what is she going on about-?

“See to the Princess. Those two buffoons will guard the door and I shall tend to the wounded and seal the rear gateway. I shall not be far and I will watch over you.”

With nothing more to say she turned and left. Leaving for the makeshift hospital off and below the side of the throne. She's provide a lot of staying power, getting those guys back on their feet. Rose was a whirlwind of destruction who by reputation alone would cause Deron's men to think twice before pushing forward. Chris' talons which can tear steel like paper would definitely be more than a formidable opponent for those war golems. There was a chance. All we needed was the arrival of the guest of honor. Prince Deron himself.

All that was left was to see to the Princess herself. Shivering atop her throne. I ascended the many steps and approached it unannounced. The sound of my steel toes on the stone was more than enough of a greeting and Violetta's eyes turned to me slowly and sadly. It was heart breaking to look at, but she was just a scared little girl. Okay, not little, she was really tall, but she certainly wasn't like the girls I had become accustomed to. She was human. I stood beside her and didn't say a thing. Neither did she. She was putting on a brave face, wiping away the tears welling up in her eyes every so often. Her eyes were red and puffy which gave away that she been crying quietly to herself for quite some time.

Far below and far away at the barricade a group of stragglers hurriedly pushed through. Soldiers and militia men, most likely what was once our last line of defense. Almost all of them were wounded in some way. The few that weren't were carrying the gravely wounded. I watched as Rissler spoke with the one who was likely their leader. I then watched as his flailing arms quickened and his royal guards and able bodied soldier began lining up at the barricade. Notching their arrows, what bowmen we had were preparing themselves in the balconies above. I watched as Rose scaled the barricade, sword slung over her shoulder while Chris circled slowly in the air above. The time

was close at hand.

Just a minute later, without warning, without parley, a battle cry let loose and destroyed the quiet before the storm. Behind it was a wave came crashing into the barricade. A wave of men and steel. Among them the occasional golem. Golems whose heavy handed swings could brush aside a man with ease and lift him off his feet. From the distance, I watched as Rose leaped into action and pounced upon them exchanging fair and equal blows with the metal monstrosities. Although made for war, they stood no chance against Rose's fiery advance. Being bred for war was no match for someone who has lived it for a lifetime. Circling above, Chris came swooping down and tore at the helpless beneath were her. Sometimes she'd lift men high into the air and drop them back down on their own advancing allies. I could swear I heard her shouts of, 'justice' above the chaotic din of battle.

The sheltered princess wasn't just shaking anymore, she was terrified. She was bearing witness first hand just how her people would die to protect her. She was also watching those who'd get themselves killed just to end her life. I looked down and watched as she played with that ring of hers. Tracing he fingers along the emerald. Sometimes twisting it gently like you would a doorknob. I put my hand on her thin shoulder and she tensed up like a frightened animal. She looked up at me with terrified eyes, but she eventually reached back with her arm laid her hand on my own. I turned my hand around and held hers, squeezing it tight and she held on firmly as well. As though she was afraid she might disappear if she let go.

In a weak voice I could barely hear, she spoke at last, “Why are you here. Sir Laven?”

That was the question I was hoping people would stop asking me. I still didn't have an answer to it.

“I don't know.” I answered honestly.

“Neither do I.” She said, choking on her parched throat, nearly sobbing.

That's pretty heavy.

“Let me guess. Your ministers handled everything?”

She didn't say anything.

“No need to be coy now. That much was pretty obvious. I'm not stupid.”

She looked down; trying to avoid looking at me.

“So now you feel guilty about everyone willing to throw their lives away to save yours?”

She looked back up and into my eyes, clasping her other free hand over my own, the waterworks ready to burst.

“Sorry to put it frankly Violetta, but you don't have that luxury. You're the princess.”

Color drained from her face. Was she expecting me to have nothing but kind words? Perhaps, but this wasn't the time for them.

“You had a lot of chances to abdicate. No one could have stopped you if that's what you really wanted. That's a perk of royalty, isn't it? I'm sure at some point you might have been brave enough to bring it up. Then you were pressured into backing down. Well... that time is long gone now. You made your choice, under duress or not. This is the consequence of doing nothing. It's usually worse than doing something. Even if you weren't running the show, you're still the symbol of this place. Something everyone believes in. Even those coming to kill us all, they believe you're a symbol. One they want to tear down, but a symbol of this place none the less. You're gonna have to accept responsibility for it.”

I could feel the strength drain from her arms, so I tightened my own grip to keep her grounded in the here and now.

“What you have to ask yourself now is, 'what am I going to do about it?'”

“There isn't a thing I can do about it.” She said quietly.

“Maybe. Are you not gonna try?”

She didn't say anything.

“I can't say why I'm here. I don't know the answer to that question. Just a series of decisions for better or worse that brought me here. For now, I'm just gonna do what I can. You should too. If it means anything, I think you not budging from the seat was the right one. Your brother has gone off the deep end.”

As I was lecturing her, my attention was torn away when melee far below us buckled and slowly backed away from the barricade. That was definitely the signal I had been waiting for. I could still spot Rose's fire and Chris flying above. The wounded were still being carried to Susan and the healed were rushing back into the front lines. We were not yet broken, we were bending. Soon enough, I spotted the golden boar. Prince Deron emerged from the wedge that was driving its way through our forces. He was surrounded by his golems who slapped down all comers with ease. They guided him to the foot of the throne where with an almost mad look in his eyes stared back at us. Around him the battle waged on. Our line was bent, crooked, but still holding. No one was following him. His golems formed a barrier blocking pursuit. There was about eight of them and they didn't budge from the spot. They had some very specific orders.

"Speak of the devil and he shall appear..." I mumbled.

This was the show that Deron wanted. I had suspected as much, but I don't feel too thrilled about being correct. This is... a lot of golems in one place. Watching them easily toss grown men in suits of armor into the air was disheartening to say the least. It wasn't just Deron who was trapped here with us. It was us trapped together with him. A bascinet on his head certainly played to the pig motif he was pushing. I see he planned to take the insult that hounded him for almost all his life and make it his own. He'd wash away Domdracveria, make it his own. I couldn't see any other ending seeing the change in his coat of arms.

“I suppose it is fate that I must kill you myself, Laven.” Deron's voice came echoing from behind his visor.

When he raised it, I wasn't surprised, but still put off by the look in his eyes. It was almost as if he truly had gone off the deep end. There were black circles underneath his eyes, as though he had not slept for quite some time. His pupils were tiny, beady and almost erratic. His eyes wide open and a grin flashed across his face. I instinctively stood in front of Violetta to shield her from this dangerous man. He slowly stepped toward the throne and I noticed the large flanged mace in his right hand.

“Princess, get behind the throne.” I said pulling and pushing Violetta out of her throne.

“Sir Laven?” She whimpered.

“Get behind the throne.”

“But-”

“I'm on it. Don't worry. Just stay safe.”

While Deron was getting closer, I took my own steps toward him, until we were only eight steps apart, the middle landing separating us. Deron came to a stop, so did I. Looking at his face was disturbing and quite frankly disgusting. I was shaking, I'd be surprised if he couldn't see it, but I did my best to wear the fiercest scowl I could because our eyes were locked on each other.

“I did not expect you to return,” Deron gleefully said. “I must give you credit where credit is due.”

“Can't say the same for you, Prince Deron. You're a mess.”

His face visibly twitched at the word 'prince'.

“Say what you will now, Laven. You will not live to see the rightful king of Domdracveria on his throne.”

“You're right, I'll be old man and long gone before that happens.”

“This is not a day that will be won with a sharp tongue, knave. It will be won with steel and I have brought with me indomitable steel. You and your friends fight bravely, but it is only temporary. My men outnumber your own and my steel warriors will not tire. Now step aside and I will make your death swift and painless. I will even bury your body and not feed it to the dogs.”

“Not gonna happen, piggy. You want the princess? You're gonna have to go through me.”

Deron grit his teeth then pulled an arming sword from his hip with his left hand and then tossed it toward me. Its broadside clattered against the stone near my feet.

“Then pick that up, King of Nothing. Unless you wish to fight me as you are, with nothing. I would prefer not to strike down a helpless unarmed man. It would spoil my mood.”

I laid my eyes on that flanged mace in his right hand and thought that it would be pretty bad to be on the reviving end of that

thing. I squatted down slowly, keeping my eyes on Deron as I wrapped my hand around the sword's hilt and slowly stood back up, pointing its tip toward him. Deron's wicked grin only widened when I did so.

"This day of reckoning is long overdue. Those scheming ministers are gone and soon the old Domdracveria will be gone. I will usher in a new age. I'll do away with the foolish traditions. How foolish they are to deny a king his kingdom over trivial things like a ring and superstitions."

"No one wanted you to be king because you're a fucking coward. You're too afraid to fight the dragoons. You think they'll stay quiet even after you kill the Princess? While I'm at it, add being a fucking maniac to that list. Even a sweet and naive girl like Violetta, if given her fair shot, would be better choice than a psychopath like you. You hated the ministers? Thought they were ruining everything? They're dead now right? You win. Go back home! Realize you're not wanted here and stop this madness!"

"You want it all to stop? Then do it with force! The time for words is over!"

Deron began taking small steps again while I remained on guard above him. When he reached the middle landing, he broke into a run and charged right at me.

Raising his mace up high he brought it down hard and fast. Probably a blow just to poke and see how though I was. Regrettably, I am not that tough. All this walking and hiking has been good for my cardio, but as for any skill with the sword or a good sword arm, I'd have to confess I had neither. The best I could do was swing the sword upwards and hope to deflect the mace away. It didn't exactly happen that way. Steel on steel sparked, but my blade was thrown backwards and I fell backwards onto the stone steps. I had to scramble and move out-of-the-way when the follow up strike came and crushed the stone where I had just been laying on my back.

Deron's face looked a little disappointed. He frowned at me like a kid who opened up his present only to find it wasn't the toy he was hoping for. However, my job isn't to defeat Deron. I merely need to keep his attention until help arrived. When I saw that even as Deron was distracted, a pile of broken bodies was forming in front of his golems, I got a bad feeling that wouldn't be coming anytime soon.

“Nothing to say now, Laven? Where is the quick wit? The biting retorts? Are you nothing without your whores?”

I grit my teeth, but held back my anger. If you're gonna play that game, don't expect me to hold back.

“Big words from a failure. Deron, you're just pathetic.”

“Words from a nobody means nothing to me. Why not cry out and beg now? Beg for your monsters to come to your aid. Do it! Let them face my steel warriors. I will have dealt my death blow to you before they come to save you.”

“A nobody? I'm the man who has accomplished everything you've failed.”

Deron charged again, wound his mace over his shoulder and flung it horizontally to crash into my knees. Surely they'd be pulverized if they took a hit like that, so I jumped. A luxury I had due to not being weighed down by a suit of plate. When I brought my own sword down while he was still recovering from the blow, I landed the edge squarely on his shoulder, but the plate didn't even dent. Instead, I felt the vibrations from the blade seep into the tang and violate my hand, causing the tiny bones there to groan and strain. I almost dropped the sword then and there. I was forced to take another leap back toward the throne when he swung again.

“Failure... I have not failed, Laven. I have won. Why don't you just accept it. You came here to die. Did you think you would get to play hero?”

“I don't give a shit about being a hero. Why don't you realize the second I returned to Ifern I had already surpassed you?”

“Your nonsense is no longer amusing, Laven.”

“You don't want to accept it do you? Chris. You know that name well don't you? She was to be your wyvern. She was your wyvern. What did you do? Get hurt and run away like a scared little child you were. A child who was pretending he already king? You bit off more than you can chew. Instead of admitting your weakness, you let it consume you. Well, guess what? I 'tamed' that wyvern. Something you couldn't do!”

“Shut up...”

“When I flew over the city, what did you hear? I certainly remember hearing something in particular.”

"...Shut up..."

"I think I recall cheering. That's right, cheering. For me. Not you. No one gives a damn that the wyverns fly over Ifern. When someone was tearing people from their houses, they were cheering for the one who was trying to stop that man. Me."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

"Let's not mention you came here to kill your little sister and take her throne. That hardly sounds like something a big brother would do for any reason. Who's the one protecting her? Me. That should be your job, but you don't care about that do you? You don't care about this kingdom. You just want it because you think it should be yours. Do you not don't care what happens to anyone? Your greed has become pathological. You certainly don't care what happens to everyone afterward either."

"Laven!" He spat.

"You've already lost, Deron. You can strike me down, kill your sister, but the only one who will think you are king is yourself!"

Losing his temper at last, Deron gave a terrifying roar with a crazed look in his eyes. Swinging wildly and fiercely. Every blow had such strength to it and each one came one after the other. There was no way for me to get an attack in myself. If I parried, the strength of the man who had long been preparing and training for this day might just shatter something on contact. Instead I was being pushed further and further up the stairs as I had to pull my limbs out of harms way and when he stood on the same step as I did, I had to duck and pull back my head to prevent what would be instant death. It wasn't long before I was pushed back to the landing where the throne rested.

I could still see Violetta cowering behind the throne, watching and trembling as her brother and I fought to the death. There was hardly any room to fight, only about ten meters squared. Any further and we'd be behind the throne where one errant swing would crush that poor girl's head in an instant. When that image crossed my mind, I was compelled forward, and when Deron threw his right arm back for another swing I stepped in instead.

I held out my left arm to keep his from swinging and that mace crashing into my side and as I ran into him, chest to chest, I swung my right fist right into the side of his helmet. There was a mighty clang, but

he hardly seemed phased. I felt a slab of steel slam into my stomach, the rounded plate knee guards slamming into my gut. Before I could recover the handle of his mace came down on the back of my head and I saw stars. I pulled back, staggering on my feet and barely dodging the follow up swing. The deathblow of a swing went by and so I used the chance to thrust forward with the sword and hit flesh, but only nicking the cheek just below Deron's left eye. It hardly drew blood at all.

It could have been a mortal blow, but Deron was quicker than you'd think weighed down by all that steel. Overextended as I was, there wasn't much I could do when the mace came back again. I tried to guard, but I misjudged and I felt the blunted edge of the mace come cracking down on my right tricep. I could feel the fracture immediately. Before I could recover a boot connected with my chest and slammed my back against the floor. I still had enough sense in me left to dodge the mace when it came for me, but there was hardly anywhere for me to go, so I felt the boot again as it connected with my ribs when I tried desperately to get the hell away.

Hacking and coughing, I dragged myself back up to my feet. My right hand was clenched tight, but shaking violently. I forced it open so that I might grab hold of the sword in my left arm, but I am certainly not left-handed. When the mace came down again when Deron was in hot pursuit, I couldn't even hold onto the blade when the force of the blow blew it out of my hand and sent it clattering down the stairs. He didn't even bother to swing again, with the back of his offhand gauntlet, he hit me as hard as he could and I went backwards tumbling down the stairs. Like a human slinky my everything crunched against the stone steps until I finally came to a rolling stop on the middle landing.

It hurt to breath. I couldn't feel my right arm, all I felt was pain there instead. My vision was blurry and I probably had a concussion. There was part of me that was trying to remind my body it had legs, but they felt like logs instead. The only thing I could control was my left arm. I used it to drag myself, flip myself onto my back and prop myself up. Only to succeed in giving me a perfect view of Deron looming over me at the top of the stairs.

“Laven!” I heard a voice behind me call.

It was frantic scream. My senses were fuzzy, but I would recognize that voice anywhere. It was Rose, but it was so far away. The whole world was wobbly and time seemed to be going at a crawl. When I looked behind me, I saw Rose fighting her way through the

crowd. At least trying to. In the melee that was all around her, the golems had surrounded and converged on her location effectively boxing her in. Her tail was an inferno and she was holding her own, but she couldn't advance. A wall of men and steel were throwing themselves at her to stop her. Even this far away I could see the look on her face. Fear and rage.

Chris was no better off. I saw her briefly take off from the corner of the room, shouting out my name, but Deron's archers had filtered into the room. Every time she tried to take to the air a storm of arrows flew by, at that distance, with that many arrows they cut and gashed even her skin and forced her back down to the ground where she was surrounded by Deron's knights and golems, forcing her to kick wildly to fight and keep them at bay.

Far down below, Susan looked ready to leap up and run up the stairs, but she was kneeling over a man whose stomach had been torn open. A pool of blood oozing from him, his intestines probably ready to burst out from his abdomen. Her tattoos were glowing a brilliant green and her paws holding the man's wound down. If she ran now, that man would die. Behind her the gate shock and shuddered with a constant rhythmic boom. It was as if a battering ram was desperately and diligently hammering away on the other side. If she wasn't nearby to keep the enchantment strong... would that door burst open and our position be flanked? There was nothing more that she could do other than grit her teeth and watch.

I certainly was alone now wasn't I?

“Sir Laven!” Came another voice.

I don't recall that one, but it made sense very soon. Rushing past the euphoric Deron was Violetta, who ran down the stairs and fell down onto her knees at my side. Deron hadn't even noticed her at first, his head slowly turning to finally acknowledge her only when she knelt down beside me. His grin spread even wider and he slowly made his way down the steps. His mace was dragging across the stone with what sounded to me like nails on a chalkboard.

“Sir Laven!” Violetta shouted into my ear again as she propped my head up on her lap.

“I though... I told you to hide.” I said, coughing, wheezing and spitting up a little blood.

“Don't speak, please!” She frantically commanded as she

used a piece of her own pure white dress to wipe the blood from the corner of my mouth.

“Nah, this is nothing....” I coughed violently, not sounding convincing at all. “I once had a spear of pure light pierce... my chest that tried... to disintegrate me. That also broke every bone... in my body... This is nothing... Really, I'm serious. I'm not just... trying to make you feel better.”

“Please, Sir Laven. Don't die!”

“Hey.” I said, as a thought crossed my mind. “I think I know why I'm here now.”

“Why Sir Laven?” She earnestly asked me, wrapping her tiny hands around my own and holding them up, trying to comfort me.

“Because I wanted to be.”

“Sir Laven?” She said, sounding rightfully confused.

I turned to look the Princess right in the eyes. "I'm not a knight. So don't call me 'sir'... I got no obligations to this place, or you... I'm no hero, I got my ass kicked... neither did I turn out to be the kind of person who pulls through and does what it takes to save the day... I'm not a saint. I only agreed to help after I got promised something in return. So... In the end, don't think so high of me. I didn't do this just for you. I did it just as much for myself... Okay, I'll confess, I got a little caught up in the saving the damsel racket."

I tried to laugh a little, but I ended only coughing up a little blood.

"I'm kind of like Deron in a way... aren't I? Somewhere along the way though... We took different paths... I actually have empathy. Maybe because I'm a sucker. I don't have what it takes. I lost my home, just like him. There are lots of things I could have done. Things I may not have been proud of, but it might have made my life easier. I wouldn't trade what I got now for it now. Helping someone out who needed it, when I... could do it... When you needed help and I thought I could actually do something... You don't have to feel guilty about it... In the end, I did what I wanted to do. Can you remember that? Stop worrying about others and just do what you want to do. You... Love this kingdom, don't you? I can see it in your eyes. The you worry, but least of all about yourself. Always worrying about what other people think. Were you okay with everything being done for you? There's nothing

wrong with being selfish. Just remember to take a good long look at Deron. He has confused what is right, with what he wants. What he wants, with what everyone wants. They're all separate things."

"So disappointing!" Deron shouted, finally looming over the two of us. "I expected a better fight. You really are nothing but talk, Laven. You should have known your place. Perhaps as a court jester." He laughed heartily. "Now, dear sister. It's time you make your sacrifice for the good of the kingdom. But first... I believe I'll put the poor lad out of his misery. I think you should experience loss before you go. Just so you know how I've felt all these years."

I pulled myself up to sit upright and then try to stand up, but Violetta quickly pulled me back down. I see... I didn't even the strength to fight back against her. Guess that means I wouldn't be up to shielding the Princess.

Deron lifted up his mace once again, preparing for an execution blow. I felt so very tired. I think I was internally bleeding as well. This was probably a symptom of shock. If I died fast enough, maybe I'd pass out before that mace crushed me. Deron did seem to be savoring it. However, he suddenly stopped. I felt a weight on my body, a frail and light one, but a weight none the less. Violetta shielded my near lifeless corpse and grasped tightly in her left hand was a piece of flagstone. Most likely a crunch of stone broken off from the steps after Deron's wild swings.

"Oh ho? Are you going to fight me now? Dear sister?" Deron laughed as he let his mace fall back to his side. "By all means. Please do. I'll give you one blow. Do your best. Maybe you'll stub my toe! Ha ha ha!"

Violetta's knuckles were pure white from squeezing down on that rock so hard, I think she might just break them. She was trembling, but she was still flaring her teeth and with her little green eyes furrowed in a pathetic attempt to be intimating. This isn't exactly how I planned for this to go. I don't enjoy the thought of dying in the arms of the princess I was trying to protect just a minute ago. This sucks.

"I only need one swing, brother." She said, as quiet as ever.

Deron smiled as he watched the girl wind her arm back, as though ready to feebly throw that fist sized rocked at him. Instead, the Princess put her other hand flat on the ground. Her bright emerald ring

shining clear as day. Raising the rock up high she hesitated for a moment before screaming and slamming that down onto her own hand. I heard two things, first the sound of cracking bone. She was a tall girl, but those girly hands are still delicate and dainty. I heard her groan, cry and tears well up in her eyes because of it. The other sound though, that was the more pressing one. It was the sound of cracking stone. It wasn't the stone in her hand, it was the emerald on her ring. When she raised the rock, below was her quivering hand, her ring finger broken beneath the ring and already swelling. The emerald though, it was cracked.

That single crack soon multiplied until the emerald a latticework. Under its own power, the large green stone quickly turned a dull green as it lost its perfectly translucent shimmer. The phenomenon didn't last for long, because the ring then burst and crumbled into a hundred pieces, worthless little green pebbles and sand being all that was left.

“I'll...Show you why... I was chosen, brother. Why... I... was so afraid... Every...day” Violetta spoke through the pain.

Suddenly her whole body seized up as she brought her hands to her chest and pulled at her dirty dress stained with my blood. She croaked as though all the air had just been sucked out of her lungs and she began convulsing and trying to breath in vain. She could no longer hold herself up and she fell over, holding herself up on all fours, as she made a bridge across my chest, stilling puttering herself between Deron and myself. I was going to ask if she was alright, even though I know that answer already. I refrained when her face looked so pained and her breathing was so labored she wouldn't be able to speak anyways.

Finally, she couldn't keep her eyes open through the pain. She shut them so fight I thought she might scrunch her whole face into a singularity. She grits her teeth so hard I thought she might just grind them into dust. But then I watched as those teeth of hers sharpen and her canines elongate. Her eyes then shot back open and her green eyes had transformed into a deep orange, her pupils and irises becoming slits. The simple brown hair atop her head and in her eyebrows turning a radiant purple from the root up to the tip of each strand, but that color did not stop there as her Plain Jane hair continued to grow and hang down from her shoulders and until it reached the floor as more and more of something escaping from inside her came rushing out all at once.

On each side of her head, I watched her ears turn from a flush pink calcify white, then turn green and expand, transforming into reptilian fins like those decorating the head of Chris and Rose. Bones creaked and cracked sickeningly. It was so loud it echoed and I could hear it, feel it almost, as a pair of brain horns protruded like mountains atop her head. There were about thirty centimeters long each, thick, slightly curved and dangerously pointy. Slowly the calcification of her ears spread along the skin of her cheeks until they had partially turned green as well, before the skin cracked and looked as though they were scales... except they didn't just look like scales, they definitely were.

I heard the sound of tearing fabric as the collar around Violetta's dress began to rip as something was pushing out from her chest. It slowly tore into a v-neck until the tear reached down to her cleavage which was bulging outward and hanging above my face was a pair of breasts that could easily contend with the other girls. Along her shoulders and down her triceps parts of her skin continued to calcify and turn green before becoming scales until just before her elbows where her arms bulged as muscle mass and thick armored scales formed, her delicate hands at the end of each clenching and digging into the hard stone like she was taking a fist full of sand. Eventually to spread of the scales reached her dainty hands which soon transformed into two meaty claws tipped with sharp ivory talons.

Down her waist and hips the sporadic scales formed, her waist shrinking and her hips bulging while it did. Her abdomen flattening, becoming taut as muscles tightened and formed underneath her skin. Finally, the scales formed and traveled until they finally reached her thighs. At her knees, her legs began to transform in very similar way her arms had. Her small feet soon transformed into fearsome claws, the talons at the end of each easily tearing up the stone beneath them as she squirmed in pain.

I watched her spine from her now ample backside elongate. A tail grew from the end of her spine, long and prehensile like a lizard's. It didn't stop until it was nearly as long as she was tall. The bone which was covered with thick impossibly powerful muscles and thick green armored scales. Soon that tail came to life and stretched and swished about, slapping the ground as it did, causing the stone to crack underneath every slap. Finally, from her shoulder blades, one last sickening rip. Unable to bear the pain any longer, the princess screamed out load and at last another pair of limbs freed themselves from her back. A huge pair of green wings. Gigantic and imposing. Armored, scaled and looking virtually invulnerable, just like the scales on her arms and legs. So large were the wings, she could probably

fold them to cover her torso, they were almost as large as Chris'.

I was so captivated, so terrified and so sickened by every bone crunch that I had forgotten about the battle below and so had everyone fighting that battle. Each and every pair of eyes in the throne room was glued on the Princess' metamorphosis. Even I knew the answer to this one. It wasn't an obscure word. This was a creature that anyone could name on sight. This was a dragon, in the flesh. She had just been a girl before. Just a tall simple and plain girl. There was a resemblance, but it was as though every imperfection was erased. Her old face conformed to the closest mathematical ratio of symmetry for beauty. Even her legs had grown, her spine elongated and her arms grow. This girl was as tall as I was, which was a surprise to see in a medieval society, she had to be well over two meters tall now.

While everyone and myself were captivated, she took the first long breathes she had managed in the past minute or so. She then slowly pushed herself upright, straightened her back and stood tall. A few flaps of her wings which then tucked back behind her.

“What in the hells?” Deron mumbled.

A primal fear seemed to spread across his face. A trauma deep rooted in his psyche. It didn't give him the most rational thought process, because he let loose a hoarse battle cry and charged the princess. Violetta only had to raise one claw and easily catch the head of the mace in her palm. When Deron tried to pull it back, it stuck firmly, as though a boulder had been placed on top of it. Then I witnessed as Violetta's fist clenched tighter and I heard the sound of bending metal. It didn't seem to take much effort and it certainly didn't take long. Just as suddenly as she had caught the mace, she released her grip which sent Deron flying backward, falling onto the stairs behind him. When he raised his mace to his eyes, the head of the flanged mace had been completely mangled and crushed into almost a perfect sphere and bent at a thirty degree angle from the handle.

“One free blow, brother?” Violetta asked.

Her voice sounded very much the same, but you could easily hear it now. It was loud and had presence behind it. Deron was still living out a childhood trauma as he back away slowly up the stairs. Violetta slowly turned her attention away from her brother and back toward me. I have to admit I was rather terrified myself. I had completely forgotten about my pain and acute case of dying. It wasn't improved when she turned and knelt down beside my body.

“Sir Laven... I am sorry, but I will need some of your power.”

I almost muttered 'what?', but before I could her face came very close to my own where it paused for a second. Our noses touched for a brief moment and I could feel a very hot breath coming from her. It smelled like... copper. Like freshly washed change with a hint of sweetness like vanilla. While I was distracted, I felt something warmer press against my lips. It was very gentle, which was surprising because they were attached to something very large, very powerful and very fierce. I know this feeling well by now. This was another kiss. There was something more innocent about it though. She didn't even slip me the tongue.

Satisfied, she gently laid my head to rest and turned back toward Deron who was still escaping up the stairs backwards. Very slowly, with heavy steps that cracked stone, Violetta followed him. She followed him until Deron's back pressed up against the throne. There he had to watch in terror as a pair of horns appeared and then the rest of the princess as she finally stopped at the top of the stairs.

“One blow, brother?” She repeated.

“You... Monster...” He mumbled again. “How...?”

“A very special blood runs in our family. I was cursed with it, not you. I was born with the ring to keep it in check. But you had to tried to take everything from me. Laven has taught me a valuable lesson taught me. Doing it so brazenly, at the risk of his own life... I love this kingdom and I won’t let you have it."

“You're not little Violetta. What did you do to my sister? My sister would never speak like-”

“SILENCE!” Violetta bellowed, the earth shaking with just the sound of her voice. "You were prepared to spill blood for it, trample over everyone without a care about who was crushed underneath. Do what you will, so that you experience no regrets." She held her claws to her heart. "I understand now, Laven. This... This freedom is what you wanted to teach me..." After mediating solemnly for a moment, she opened her eyes, took a sudden aggressive stance and glared at Deron. "I will be the one to save this kingdom. I will begin by saving one man from another. Brother, you were ready to spill blood for the throne. Laven's blood and then my own. That means you are prepared to have it be your own. You won’t take anything precious from me anymore!"

Closing her eyes, Violetta stood perfectly still and calmed her breathing and then there was a brilliant white glow that covered her entire body. A familiar white glow that washed away her features and left only a white silhouette behind. Violetta's already large frame bulged and grew. She fell onto her 'hands' and her torso elongated. Her hands and feet soon sunk into the stone as it cracked under her weight which was rapidly increasing, the size of both matching the size of her giant torso. Her neck stretched, the size of her head, tail and wings followed the rest. The pretty features of her head, changing into that of a fierce giant horned lizard. Soon she was the size of a house. Fourteen meters long, almost half of that tail and five meters tall at the shoulder whilst on all fours. Her tail coiling around the steps up to the throne. I was underneath her belly and her head was close, very close to Deron. It was as though she had transformed into a giant dinosaur. No... Not quite like that. Just like Chris had done, she had assumed a form more familiar when one invokes the image of a dragon. A giant green dragon.

I watched her chest puff out as her lungs filled with air. High above Deron was frozen still with fear. Unable to move, unable to speak. Finally, her lungs could fill with air no more, she roared and with it an inferno the likes I had never seen before. With the sound of a roaring explosion I heard a man screaming, but it didn't last long. Inside the cone of flame which didn't stop until it broke against the far wall of the throne room, was Deron. The fire only lasted for about eight seconds, but when it ended, there wasn't anything left behind. The stone throne was nothing but orange molten slag. Even the far wall of the throne room had turned molten orange warped and was dripping onto the floor. The only thing that might have proved Deron was there and ever existed, was black shadow in the stone and some ash.

"That's a little overkill for roast pig? Don't you think... You even... Forgot the... apple." I mumbled aloud to myself.

“Laven!” I heard my name called out again.

I felt a furry pair of paws hold up my head and a soft and warm green light flow through me. There was also shouting, jeering, panic. People were crying out my name, but it was all fading away. My vision was quickly turning black until there was nothing but darkness as my consciousness slipped away. A feeling which had become like an old friend of mine.

Chapter 47

I felt as though I was floating in the most wonderful place; a perpetual sinking feeling supported by a fluffy sensation against my body. I also felt lightheaded, dizzy and a little sick to my stomach, so I guess that means I'm not dead. That or this is the worst afterlife I've had to experience thus far. My body felt heavy, probably because I was feeling so weak. I didn't have the strength to hold myself up or even push off the blankets covering me.

What I did not feel, was cold. There was a warmth spreading through my body from my arm. Grasping tightly around my right hand was a claw, red claw whose owner had buried her face onto the bed sheets. Rose had my hand in a vice-like grip that I had no hope of breaking as she quietly snored and soaked a patch of the covers with drool. A slight tepid spring gust blew in from the window that rustled her long disheveled red hair. Sticking out from the back of the chair she sat on, her tail flicked lazily back and forth, the flame on its ridge quiet and somber.

Outside the window the sun shone through, gone were the dark smoke clouds that choked Ifern when last I was awake. I had to have been out for at least a day, but what exactly had I been doing again? My head still feels a little fuzzy and I'm not exactly sure why I'm here in this bed. If I suffered some kind of injury it must have been healed already. Susan was probably here earlier. Where did she get off to? As diligent as Rose is at times like this, I'm not too confident about her story telling abilities.

The first one to arrive nonchalantly into the room was Rissler, he didn't even notice I was awake and watching him, so I startled him when I bid him, 'Hello.'

"Laven?" He jumped in surprise. You're awake."

"Just sleep talking." I said sarcastically.

"If you can joke, you must be well." The old man laughed.

He stole a glance at Rose still sleeping at my bedside, he gave a warm smile.

"She hasn't left since they carried you hear, you know?"

"And if she doesn't wake up I'm afraid I won't be able to leave." I said trying in vain to raise my hand and Rose's dead weight

with it.

I couldn't even raise it past a couple of centimeters off the bed.

"Where is everyone else? What happened?"

Rissler nodded, as though agreeing with himself over something, "You did hit your head pretty hard... First you should know, Deron is dead. His knights surrendered shortly after and his mercenaries fled."

Deron... Now a torrent of memories came flooding back.

I couldn't hide the panic in my voice when I had to ask, "And those golems?"

"Stopped moving after Deron got ashed. The princess came to an agreement with them though. The poor things."

"Wait. What?-" I tried asking.

I looked over at the door two see two sets of cold emotionless eyes peeking in, hanging vertically along the door frame. When I spotted them, they calmly retreated and their fingers wrapped around the door frame pulled back.

"It would be a shame to scrap em. The Princess said mercy was the best option. They only follow orders after all. IF someone like Deron is given' em, of course they act out like before."

"They're guarding my door?" I said, dumbfounded.

"Not everyone is happy Deron is gone. Still not sure who we can trust after the battle."

"Is that a subtle hint I need to make myself scarce, Rissler?"

"You said it, not me." He said very seriously, different from his rather jovial attitude till now. "You definitely didn't hear that from me if the Princess asks."

Okay... A bit odd. I was going to ask about the others, but Rissler interrupted, as though he was desperate to change the subject.

"By the way, those girls take their orders absolutely though. Don't have to worry about anything. Besides, Rosette there tired herself out and still wasn't sleeping the last time I came to check up on

you about four hours ago.”

"Then-"

"Also, the wolf told me she was heading back to the library after she stabilized you. Said something like, 'being on the verge of a big breakthrough I want to show him after he wakes up.' Chris has had a lot of things to talk with the Princess about. A lot of things.”

I wasn't sure what Rissler was talking about at first, but then the memories came flooding back. The sound of a precious stone cracking and smashing to bits. That and the sound of cracking of bones and ripping of flesh. A front row seat to a girl transforming before my very eyes. The tall but frail and dainty princess bulging and morphing into a fierce dragon. Watching at a man was reduced to nothing but ash in a manner of seconds... There must have been quite a look on my face because Rissler's expression toward me was one of concern.

“Everything is alright now, Laven. Stay calm. You lost a lot of blood. At least that's what the wolf told me. Internal bleeding or something like that... I will tell the Princess you are awake. She wanted an audience with you as soon as you were able to-”

“Laven!” Came a desperate yelp from the doorway.

Crossing in front of the door were two large axes barring the entrance, Susan on the other side panting and looking quite pissed.

She growled angrily, “Remove yourselves you metallic simpletons. Before I-”

“Enough you two.” Commanded Rissler. “Let her through.”

Without a moment of hesitation, the axes were pulled back. Susan took a deep breath to calm herself down and then walked through the door. She was still breathing rather heavily through her nose and her tail was wagging excitedly when she looked down calmly at me. Clearing her throat, she turned to address Rissler.

“If you would so kindly extradite yourself from the room, Sir Rissler... I must speak privately with Laven.”

Rissler raised his hands into the air, wore a jokingly coy smile and let himself out of the room, closing the door on his way out. I could hear his voice muffled from beyond and as he walked away a clatter of steel followed him.

“Most exciting news, Pharaoh.” Susan said monotonously.

Didn't sound so exciting, but then again, this is Susan...

“I may have discovered something of great interest in the Domdracverian royal archives.”

She pulled a stack of papers and a couple books out of a messenger bag and began spreading them out on the bedsheets, arranging them so I could read them. I still don't get how she does it with those paws...

“Please, Pharaoh, if you will... Inform me if you perceive anything peculiar.”

I propped myself up the best I could and began searching through the pieces of paper and books opened to specific pages with my free left hand. Every loose piece of primitive parchment and thin leather strip had nothing but white space and tiny black circles arranged randomly across them. Every so often there were runes I could not decipher from different languages. They all seemed to be commentary on another stranger set of pictograms. Like hieroglyphs or some bizarre alphabet.

"I'm not sure what I'm looking at, Susan.” I said plainly.

"Look more closely for patterns, Pharaoh.”

She then produced a feather and dipped its tip in ink and presented it to me. Am I supposed to write or draw something? Perhaps this is some kind of quiz or game? A riddle? Last time I checked she was an Anubis, not a Sphinx.

I studied the sheets some more, but as time went on I felt something click in the back of my head. I could almost hear it do so. My hand reached out on its own and began drawing lines across the paper. It was like playing a game of connect the dots, except with a level of excitement I hadn't felt since I was four years old. A man kneeling with a belt. A charging bull. A being half horse half man. A woman chained to stone. A pot... no, a dipper.

I couldn't believe it as I let slip, “My god... they're full of stars.”

"As I suspected.” Susan nodded.

She leaned over, propping herself up on the bed with her face

right next to mine as she put down another text on the bed. With a claw, she opened to a page and traced it over an illustration of a large stone ziggurat surrounded by overgrown jungle.

"Stencils and etchings of murals discovered deep within these ancient temples. Temples from a civilization long since lost. Perhaps as old as my kingdom once was. No one has explored these ruins in over one thousand years. No one who has returned. I thought it curious, because there is no such arrangement of stars in the heavens above."

"That's because these are constellation maps you'd find back in my world! How the hell would anyone here know about it? This is beyond just a coincidence. They all match. Every single one."

"That is why I suggest we travel there. Far south. Far beyond the scattered Empire we walk now. Beyond the coast and beyond the seas. On a southern continent, buried deep in the jungle we shall rediscover these temples. Hopefully the mysteries there will solve the enigma we have now."

"Susan! This is? I mean- I"

I was bouncing around excitedly as I flipped through the pages and fingered through the books. In my excitement, I put my hand on top of her head and ruffled the hair between her two ears. Her face blushed beat red and her tail wagged back and forth behind her furiously as she drew in her shoulders and made herself smaller to bear the embarrassment. I only realized what I was doing a little too late and pulled my hand back quickly.

I was expecting her to be upset, perhaps angry. Instead she had a very demure and erotic expression on her face. Wet glistening and droopy eyes, full lips a full flushed face over her tan skin. I went rigid. Completely still. Susan only leaned in closer and closer until she sat her bottom on the bed, put her paws on both my shoulders and brought her face closer and closer to my own. My own lips were soon quivering as hers came closer and closer. I could feel her hot and sweet breath as she parted hers, her tongue waiting just behind.

A pulling on my right arm snapped me out of my stupor and Susan's eyes refocused as we both heard a loud yawn as Rose slowly sat back upright, stretching her arms above her head. After rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her free claw, she locked her gaze on me and went from groggy to hyperactive in three seconds flat.

"Laven!" She gleefully cried out, then pounced on me.

For the second time in maybe as many days, she tackled me and began rubbing her cheek against my own and pressing her body against me, undulating back and forth, squishing and pressing her breasts all over me. Susan had to hold on for dear life on my left as she went from surprised to pissed in three seconds flat. Before anyone could say anything, we all started sniffing at the same time and looked in unison at the paper plaid across the bed. Some of them had edges that were already smoldering, curling and turning black with a flame creeping across them.

"Ah!" yelped Susan. "Stop that at once! Get off the bed! Put out the flames!"

"Wha? What did you tell me to do, huh?" Rose said confrontationally, as she leaned over and past my face and gave Susan a delinquent-like expression.

"You're destroying precious documents you incurable firebrand!" Susan barked back, leaning over and crashing foreheads together with Rose.

Stuck in the middle of them fighting, with only half my blood and no strength and Susan's pages burning; I sat there helpless hoping everything would resolve itself soon before the bed sheets lit up.

***

I waited for the morrow till I struggled to get out of bed, I'm sure I'd be weak for about another month without help, but Susan sticking close by and applying magic healing to replace the blood I had lost sped that up. I think I'd be back to full strength before the week was done. At the very least I could walk now and that means I couldn't keep Princess Violetta waiting any longer.

Rose and Susan were on my left and right, after having made up for the fight yesterday. Alright, I made them make up and, but I still didn't really buy they had. As long as they weren't fighting when we passed through the doors to the throne room... Not that we couldn't get much worse, the castle had been ransacked only couple days ago and there wasn't a decent formal thing for me to wear. The girls didn't seem to care, Rose was even walking with her arms resting behind her head while Susan claimed she was dressed formally. Quite the priest's attire... her normal clothing...

As we approached the doors, two of those golems effortlessly swung it open and beyond was a huge crowd that had gathered on such short notice. Rows of knights lining a ragged and torn red carpet, their swords held high to make an arch for us to walk under. Shoulder to shoulder, the three of us walked forward as trumpets blared like out of some renaissance fair. A herald cried out at the top of his lungs our names. Short and precise. After-all, none of us had half a page worth of titles.

Near the throne a group of knights I had not seen before were assembled. There wasn't more than fifty and beside each knight was a woman... No, I couldn't just glance over it like that... None of these women were human and they had wings for arms. They were wyverns and they came in many forms: short and tall, girlish, mature and even some child-like. A wide variety of scales from blue, red, yellow and green and a wild variety of hair colors to match, going beyond just brown, black and blonde. Each of them different, but each of them a sight to behold, their curves and facial features a sight no man could deny.

As I approached the throne I saw old man Rissler, dressed in formal parade armor and beside him was a lovely lady. With long black hair tied in two braids that hang over her shoulders and a warm motherly smile. Her scales colored a deep blue and of course the powerful legs tipped with ferocious talons Only as tall as Rissler's shoulders and her wings wrapped around two small wyverns, only children who peeked shyly over their mother's wings at me, one with blonde hair and red scales and the other black scales with silver hair. With a whisper from their mother and wink from their father their faces lit up with smiles as they joyously waved at me as I walked past.

Sitting on her throne, well, more of a stool now since her fire breath had actually melted it. That's a scary thought. All that stone reduced to lava in a few seconds. Some of it flowed down the stairs a little... Still, she was sitting atop it, one leg crossed over her other knee, resting her chin on an open claw, the elbow propping herself upright on the one armrest that was left and her giant scaly wings fluttering a few times behind her. Standing beside her was Chris. She was standing tall, like a soldier during inspection. She stole a quick glance at me and a smile before she noticed I had turned my attention toward her and being caught fraternizing while on duty quickly looked away and went even more rigid than before. The three of us came to the foot of the stairs leading to the throne where we were expected to kneel. Rose and Susan did so, but Violetta shouted out when I was about to bend a knee.

"My hero does not need to kneel... Not in public at least." Her voice now far more powerful and perfectly clear even this far away.

Everyone else in the throne room looked at one another after she said that, but she began speaking again which demanded their silence.

"You have done a great service for my kingdom that I am not sure I could repay if I spent the rest of my life doing so... You should receive your honors at the very least." She shifted her seating position upright and proper. "I care not for technicalities that say you have broken many laws we have, all I care is that as this kingdom's hero is that he given what he desires. Would it be money? Liberation is a priceless thing."

I didn't need long to thing, I gave my honest answer, "I don't need anything. I wasn't responsible for winning the day. And I told you I'm not a knight or a hero. I fulfilled my contract and I have learned where I have to go next."

If it's money, Rose has more than enough. Any more would just bring more trouble with it.

"Princess, at the end it was you who saved your own kingdom. I just had a few words. Some harsh, some of advice. You can take pride in that, not me."

Violetta closed her eyes as she listened and began nodding her head as I finished.

"The exact answer I expected. You never fail to disappoint, Laven."

She stood up from her throne and began walking down the steps toward us. Each time those powerful talons came into contact with the stone, I could hear the rock grind under the weight and mere pressure she exerted with her presence. The air seemed to get heavier the closer she was. When she was only a few steps above us, she snapped her fingers and gave a quick glance back toward Chris who quickly followed her down the steps to return to her side.

"Laven. You have my blessings, my gratitude and you are always welcome to return to Domdracveria. Although you think you are not worthy of it, I will arrange for you a hero's homecoming. Although your desire to continue your journey troubles me, I must respect it.

When you have learned all you have to learn, I will await the day you return. Until then, my dearest friend Chris will watch over your in my stead."

Chris' eyes shot wide open, I don't think she had been briefed on this yet.

"I know you have performed the ritual, I would not dream of separating you. You are my precious friend and one of my greatest treasures. I would trust no one more than you to guard another precious treasure of mine."

A quiet murmuring floated around the throne room. I risked a glance over my shoulders and saw Rose and Susan exchange worried glances as well before hurriedly returning their gazes downward. Chris' eyes were welling up with tears as well. I'm sure she was keeping her lips tight so she wouldn't wail and cry right now as well. She was so overcome with emotion she threw her arms around Violetta and gave her a hug. Violetta gently put her own claws around Chris and held her tightly. It was a beautiful display of friendship, I don't think I've ever seen a more sincere and touching one in all my life. They finally parted and exchange entire conversations with just their eyes. It seemed to go beyond just being able to complete each other's sentences, there seemed to be no need for any more words at all.

"Well~" Rose drolled. "Thank you very much Princess, but we really need to be going. Lots of ground to cover."

"I-indeed" Susan stuttered, her tone very artificial and strained. "We shouldn't distract you from the work you have ahead of you. Reconstructing your kingdom and unifying it. Come now Laven." She said stepping over to my left and wrapping her paws around my arm.

"Yes, husband. Let's get going. Like right now..." Rose said, crossing over to my right and wrapping her claws around my arm.

"Hold on you two, aren't you two being- whoa!" I said trying to calm them down when they started pushing and dragging me back down the carpet toward the exit.

I stole a glance over my shoulder to see Chris and Violetta exchange their last good byes. Seeing we were already leaving she jumped to act and bounded her way over, calling for us to wait. I looked over at Violetta and met her gaze for one last time as well. A mischievous smile and wink that caused my spine to shiver as she

wrapped her arms under her breasts and lifted them up a little teasingly. My head was forced forward again when Chris ran up and wrapped her wide wing span around Rose and Susan as she pressed her chest and ample breasts against my back. Chris seemed clueless as the four of us moseyed our way out of the throne room and back onto the trail of adventure together.

Chapter 47.5

Through stained glass murals, sunlight shone through each pane of painstakingly sculpted glass. Each told a story from long ago; of heroes and saints from centuries gone by, fighting monsters, evil beings and rogue gods and of saints showing moments of great sacrifice, compassion and miracles. Within the hallowed stones a chant from brown robed monks set a peaceful and solemn air. Ancient dust filtered through the air and colored sunbeams peacefully cascaded over the endless rows of pews. They sat empty now, but in the congregation, there was a lone figure and an escort. Draped in brown robes, the figure floated down the nave, past the monks chanting in meditation. Following behind a clank of steel from knight hidden away behind thick armor.

The monks paid the two no heed and the two paid no attention to the monks. They passed through unhindered past the alter and the sanctuary and through another massive pair of doors. Beyond this door there was hardly any light as there were no windows. Only cold stone unlike the polished and decorated ones in the church behind them. The knight grabbed hold of a torch from the wall and the two disappeared down a spiral staircase of stone.

Far beneath the church, the spiral staircase led to the door of another chamber. Beyond it the simple stone was banished yet again, an opulent antechamber of marble led into a huge circle of a room with a dome ceiling high above. The room was still dark, only illuminated by the knight's torch. High above and all around there were elaborate murals painted in fresco depicting scenes you'd expect to find in holy scripture. Among them were intricate lines painted in gold that were woven between them.

The robed man stepped forward, out of the touch light and onto an elevated and flat marble circle on the ground. When he stepped upon and then knelt down, a click echoed inside the chamber and the circle sunk down until it matched the level of the floor. A gust of wind appeared from nowhere and blew out the light of the torch, but that light was soon replaced when the gold lines crisscrossing the room started limiting their own light. It was dull, but eventually the whole room was buzzing with energy and divine light.

One by one a small orb of light began collecting in the air. They formed a semicircle in front of the kneeling man and those orbs of light soon expanded and transformed into black rectangular slabs of stone, twice the size of any man. They were not real, they were only made of

light, but they appeared solid as any object. One by one they appeared until there were nine and on each one a large symbol of radiant gold coloured light. Each one was numbered one through nine. Pulsating around that number were a series of other runes, a divine incantation given form that was woven onto the surface, front and back, of each slab.

“You have arrived at last,” Said the fifth stone.

“We feared we would need to send another,” Said the third.

“Your holiness,” Said the kneeling man. “I bring dire news.”

“We feared you would,” Said the fifth. “The north is a stubborn and unforgiving land.”

“One that must be shown the light of The Almighty before it is too late.” Said the sixth.

The voice from each stone sounded distinct, but each one like an old man's nonetheless.

“Your choice of word leads me to believe that you have failed.” Said the first. “Is that true? Inquisitor Zerin?”

The hooded figure raised his head, “Yes. But not in vain. I encountered a new threat that has revealed itself. Only a man, but a man immune to holy water blessed under The Almighty himself!”

The slabs went silent. It was an ominous silence.

“Are you questioning the all knowing and all powerful Almighty, Inquisitor Zerin?” Said the second, its voice dripping with venom.

“No, your holiness. He is only a man, but that the Almighty cannot touch him. I tried to stop him, but failed...”

“Only a man, but you could not dispatch him?” Asked the first skeptically.

“He is allied with the Thorn Knight. More than allies, I know they consort with each other most foully, but still the Almighty could not smite him!”

“The Thorn Knight?” Gasped the third in disbelief.

“I had heard she was hiding in the north.” Said the sixth.

“Not only then,” continued Zerin. “He resurrected an evil from an age long gone by. Foul magics born from false gods. In the desert of the North they crossed and with foul magics kept their lives.”

“Continue Zerin.” Commanded the First.

“I was defeated. Alice was slain when she failed to defeat the beast. The man who calls himself Laven took the blow instead. The spear of Saint Alicus, directly to the chest. He did not die.”

“Impossible!” Shouted the eight. “You anger me with your lies, Zerin!”

“Silence!” Shouted the first. “Zerin, continue.”

“I was left for dead buried beneath the earth in those Almighty cursed ruins. My servants managed to dig me out and save my life, but so too Laven was long gone. I have heard he passed through Vilmheim and Domdracveria since then and while my life was held but a thread from heaven.”

“Vilmheim has destabilized. Our efforts to make inroads in tatters.” Spoke the third.

“Domdracveria... Prince Deron, the royal scion we thought we could negotiate with has perished.” said the ninth.

“Replaced by his sister, a dragon who had hid in human form. A disgusting affront to the Almighty.” Spat the second.

“Do you not see?” Pleaded Zerin. “That all of this happens when Laven journeys by? Only a man, but a blight. I do not know how or why, but neither can the Almighty harm him!”

“Perhaps the Almighty does not wish to.” Spoke the seventh at last, a woman's voice.

“What do you mean?” asked the first.

“Perhaps this Laven you speak of is a punishment from the Almighty? There has been a ceasefire with the Demon Lord too long. We have grown complacent since the incursion of demon realms came nearly to a stop decades ago. The monstrosities that follow this man and the calamity he brings upon our efforts are but a sign.”

“Yes, your holiness!” Zerin shouted excitedly. “If you would grant me your blessings and support, I will leave for the north again and intercept him. This time I will be prepared to put an end to him!”

“Zerin... Remove your hood.” Bid the first.

“Y-your holiness?” Zerin stuttered. Shaken.

“Remove. Your. Hood.”

Zerin hesitated, but with one arm removed the hood, slowly. There was an eye-patch over his left eye. Running diagonally from his forehead to his chin, there was a scar.

“As I suspected.” Said the first. “Not only are you still injured, you are blinded with rage and desire for revenge. Do you think we are just a tool to be abused for your own ends?”

“N-no! Your holiness, I would never-”

“Your arm as well. It is broken still. Do not try to deceive us. If what you tell us is true, then we must deal with it at once.”

“My servants and I are more than-”

“Zerin. We have no time or desire to debate!” Yelled the first, causing Zerin to cower. “Do you realize just how close the Empire and all the realms of the faithful are to collapse at any given time? Do you comprehend the number of threats to our order, the world's order and humanity’s continued existence there are? Every day souls are lost to the abyss. Tempted by lust. Corrupted with pleasure, promises of wealth, false happiness, false love and false fulfilment. Do you understand how close villages, towns, cities and even entire kingdoms are to turning into demon realms within a fortnight if we are ever not forever vigilant? This is not the threat our ancestors faced. Few and far between are the hordes of ferocious beasts spoiling for war. Eager to slaughter mankind and feast upon his flesh. It is an insidious threat from the inside we face now.”

“Yes, your holiness. I understand,” Zerin responded meekly.

“Not long ago, on the eastern islands, a pretender shogun thought to storm our missionary port of Yagasaki. Together with his army and his Demon Fox mistress, he thought to have the other lords bow to him and end their civil war. We have dealt with both. Permanently. And we hear this good news from the one who did it.”

From the shadows in the far side of the room, a small lithe figured materialized. It was draped mysteriously underneath long and thick brown robes. Zerin's good eye shot open in surprise, even the knight behind him was taken aback. Neither had felt that person's presence. There wasn't any exit but the entrance, had that figure been there from the beginning? Maybe it had somehow snuck in after?

“The Green Reaper,” the first said deliberately.

“The Green... Reaper...” Repeated Zerin with his mouth now agape.

“We will deal with our blight and cleanse away our sins. Most assuredly.”

“Your holiness, please. I beg of you. For all my years of service. For all the heretics I have brought to light and justice. Allow me deal with-”

Zerin didn't manage to get another word in. Standing behind him and to his left, the figure had materialized almost as if out of thin air. His knight noticed too late, and wrapped a hand around its sword, but there was no chance. With the sound of ripping fabric and a ringing sound like a sword cutting through the air, a green blade emerged from the figures right sleeve. It wasn't made of steel, it was chitinous, like an insect and in a flash, father than the eye could follow, the edge was up against Zerin's throat. The blade a little longer than a meter was attached to the figure's arm at the top of the wrist. A wrist attached to delicate and slender human fingers, clothed in dark green gloves. Rather, it was part of a skintight body suit connected to the rest of the body. At the base of the blade, at the wrist, was something like half a vambrace made of the same chitinous material.

The figure spoke with a femininely soft, hollow and empty voice, “Your injury is not perseverance. It is weakness.”

“That is quite enough.” Commanded the third.

“As you wish, your holiness.” The girl with the arm blade dryly said.

With a snap and a steely ring, the blade folded back on the hinge at the wrist, resting on the girl's slender forearm. The torn sleeve of her robe flapping before settling down and hiding her away again. Zerin fell from his kneeling stance and onto all fours where he started

coughing violently.

“Rest now, Zerin. This, 'Laven', will be dealt with. We will send for you again when your arm is healed and your health has returned.” Commanded the first.

One by one the slabs turned from black to white and then disintegrated into a million points of light which floated toward the floor where they disappeared. Zerin was still coughing. When he reached up with his good hand, it came back lightly covered in blood and he snarled.

“Sir Zerin?” The knight said, a womanly voice echoing behind the steel.

She sounded worried as she knelt down at his side to help him back up. He pushed her arm aside and stood up on his own, throwing a glance where the Green Reaper had been before, only to see she had vanished. He quickly looked over the entire room, but even though it was better lit than before the meeting, she was nowhere to be found. Even the door leading outside had not been disturbed. He stomped on the floor, grit his teeth and cursed under his breath.

“Revenge will be mine. I won’t hand it over to anyone else.” He traced his hand over his scar and held the palm of his hand over the eye-patch. “Just you wait... Laven.”

Epilogue: The Princess and the Coin

Once upon a time, there was a kingdom that sat on top of the world. Little cottages and houses were nestled snugly into some very big and tall mountains and the people there were content. It was cold, but every family was never found wanting. This happy and magical place was ruled by a princess and what a girl this princess was!

She was big, strong and beautiful; but the people were scared of her. This made her sad because she loved them all very much. You see, she was a princess, but she wasn't just any old princess. No doubt you have been read stories of princesses being kidnapped by dragons and being rescued by brave knights, but this girl was a dragon! She was a girl like any other, but her hands and feet were green, scaly and ended with sharp talons. Her skin was pure, white and fair, but underneath it was tougher than iron, like a dragon's scales. From her back a huge pair of wings like a dragon grew and from her bottom swayed a long dragon's tail. From her head, a pair of horns grew and curled menacingly from under her long flowing locks of purple hair. She could even breath fire! That scared people the most.

She was taller than any man in the kingdom and strong enough to win a game of tug o' war with a dozen knights and she could do it alone! With one arm! She was kind and always thought about others, but she also had a temper and the people of the castle were at a loss on how to cure it. For you see, she was not always a dragon. The princess used to be just an ordinary girl before, but she was born with dragon blood in her veins. One day became that dragon so she could rule her kingdom. What a quiet and timid girl she was before! You never would have thought the two girls were the same. The people were afraid their cute princess was gone and the big dragon girl was left to rule the kingdom.

So the people of the castle put out a challenge: Cure the Princess' temper for a handful of gold coins. From all over the kingdom the people came and no two ideas were the same.

A bard and jester came and played silly songs and danced dizzily, but the princess did not even crack a smile.

A dashing knight errant arrived and tried to court the princess, but he quickly departed the castle trying to put out the flames that had covered his rear end.

At last a farmer came with nothing but a large jug of goat's milk.

He said when he was feeling down, he would drink it warm then sit and relax. When the princess drank it, she became very tired but nothing more and she was still irritable.

With the help of the farmer the people of the castle figured out what the problem was. Their princess was having trouble sleeping. The farmer was paid a handful of gold and a new challenge was put out: A purse filled with gold to the one who lulls the Princess to sleep. From far and wide the people came and no two ideas were the same.

A sorceress arrived who claimed her spells could put her to sleep. The princess was a dragon though and magic had little sway over her.

An old sage with a book of a thousand tales came, but the old sage fell asleep first after reading many stories while the princess did not.

A tailor who claimed to have made the most comfortable mattress in the world couldn't even get her to slumber.

The people in the castle were distraught. Every day their princess could not sleep and every day the bags under her eyes were easier to see. Her temper was also getting worse by the day, so the people were also getting very scared. What would she do if she finally got very cross one day? The people in the castle offered a whole potato sack of gold to the one who could find a way to lull the princess to her slumber. From all over the world the people came and no two ideas were the same. But like before, none of the ideas worked. The people of the castle were very worried now. They ran about and thought very hard, but no one could think of an idea that worked.

That was when one of them asked, "Has anyone seen the princess today?"

The Princess had gone missing and that scared the people of the castle. They searched high and low, but they eventually found her inside her chamber. She wasn't resting in the wooden chair made by the fairies, she wasn't on bed of the finest silks in the world, she wasn't even listening to the magic musical box crafted by the songstress sirens. She wasn't on, rolled up in, or between anything all the other people in the world had brought. On the floor was the potato sack full of gold, the princess was curled up on it like a kitten. The people of the castle were befuddled; they didn't understand.

"But of course!" One of the princess' maids, a tall and lanky

girl, cried out.

She told everyone the stories her mother had put her to bed with when she was little. Stories about dragons that stole and hoarded gold and kept it away in their caves. They had spent so much time thinking of her as a princess and not a dragon that they had missed the obvious. But even then, the princess still stirred, tossed and turned in her sleep on the pile of gold that was her new bed. The people were worried she might not get a good night's sleep and be just as grumpy as before. She looked like she was reaching out for something, but no matter how much gold from the castle treasury they added to the pile, she still tossed and turned. Even when the vault was empty and the room was knee deep with coins, jewels, trinkets, art and magic baubles she still tossed and turned.

"But of course!" One the princess' other maids, a short and chubby girl, cried out.

She quickly ran to the servant's quarters and all the people of the castle followed her. Everyone was curious, but she didn't speak a word. 'I must concentrate!' she replied to their questions. There she sewed and embroidered so quickly that her hands were quickly sore with blisters. In no time at all she had sewed and stuffed a pillow. It was a pillow as tall as a man and on it was a crudely stitched picture of a man on it. Some people recognized who it looked like and they eagerly followed the maid back to the Princess' room. There she laid it next to the slumbering princess who quickly wrapped herself around it. Like magic she drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

The people were so relieved, but they dared not take any of the gold from the room while she slept to give the maids the reward. The princess might just awaken most irate. Many a brave knight are remembered for perishing while trying to rob a dragon's lair. At least it would just as safe with her as it would be in the vault they thought.

So the people of the castle quickly left and shut the door quietly behind them. Inside the room the Princess was grinning widely and happily mumbling something in her sleep. She then playfully chomped down on the corner of the pillow, on the face of the man pictured on the pillow.

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Laven was minding his own business, walking under the trees rustling in a gentle breeze with a warm sun shining overhead, but he

was suddenly seized by a sudden shiver that ran through his whole body. He rubbed his hands together and came to a stop as he looked around confused.

Rose, the salamander girl, stopped walking too and turned around when she noticed Laven stop, "Laven, husband. What's wrong?" She asked.

"Nevermind. It's nothing." He replied.

He said so, but he had terrible shivers every so often for whole afternoon. There was no way for him to explain it. The wind wasn't that cold and his forehead felt normal, so it wasn't a cold. Eventually he decided to ignore it and the feeling went away, or at the very least he stopped noticing it.